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"It's So Cold in the D:" How Detroit Rappers of the 1980-1990s Respond to Social Inequity[283]

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Abstract:

This paper examines the rap music scene of Detroit during the 1980s and 1990s, analyzing its intricate relationship with the socio-economic landscape of post-industrial Detroit. As the city grappled with the collapse of its once-thriving automotive industry, rising unemployment, and systemic disenfranchisement, rap music emerged as both a creative response and a critical intervention in these crises. Focusing on how Detroit's rappers addressed issues such as police violence, economic marginalization, and the emergence of "hustle culture"—a survival strategy shaped by career crime—this study explores rap as a form of artistic expression that reflects the attitudes of the people who created it. Through a combination of lyrical analysis and historical inquiry informed by critical discourse analysis, this paper investigates how Detroit rappers engaged with these challenges, not only through their music, but also through activism and community engagement. Additionally, the study considers the role of gendered labor in the city's underground rap scene, particularly how female artists navigated both the male-dominated music industry and the broader socio-economic struggles of the era. By examining rap's function as a platform for voicing dissent, promoting solidarity, and advocating for change, this paper situates hip-hop as a vital medium for contesting socio-economic inequities and fostering community empowerment.

Keywords: Hip-hop; Resistance; Critical discourse analysis; Urban decline; Labour; Gender

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1. Introduction

"Being in the D is bad for your health," raps Detroit native LaTonya Myles, better known by her stage name T-Baby. The year is 2008, and Myles' friend Mason Graham had been shot and killed while trying to break up a fight. Myles wrote "It's so Cold in the D" as a response to his death and to express her frustration with violence in Detroit.[285] Despite Myles' good intentions, the song and music video received intense mockery, with World Star Hip Hop calling it the "Wackest Video of the Year."[286] Even though the song is undoubtedly a hard listen (Myles struggles to stay on the beat), it has become somewhat of an anthem for the people of the Detroit area. Artists such as New Kids on the Block and Usher have performed it at their concerts in Detroit, and everyone knows the lyrics.[287] In spite of the song's rougher aspects, people identify with its lyrics. It is cold in the D, indeed.

This song is representative of only one person's response to Detroit's social and political atmosphere made through rap. Detroit has had a thriving musical scene since the Great Migration, with jazz, gospel, R&B, house, and many other genres flourishing in Detroit, thanks to none other than Detroit's Black community.[288] It is not a rare occurrence that music made by Black Detroiters has addressed the fact that they have been mistreated and oppressed by the city they call home. Policies like redlining and housing discrimination, as well as issues like unemployment and gun violence have plagued Detroit for decades. The Detroit race riots of 1967 were a large-scale response to the way that Black Detroiters had been treated by the city. The riots also symbolized countercultural expression for African Americans in Detroit, from which hip hop music was born.[289] After the decline of the auto industry began in the 1950s, many Black Detroiters struggled to stay afloat, while a lack of jobs and an increasing crime rate instigated white flight to the suburbs.

In relation to and following changing population demographics, white flight additionally pushed further decentralization of the automotive industry. The majority of

[285] Adam Graham, "It's Still Cold in the D for Detroit Rapper T-Baby," *The Detroit News*, June 6, 2015.
[286] "Wackest Video of the Year: It's So Cold in the D," World Star Hip Hop, August 25, 2008, https://worldstarhiphop.com/videos/wshh0JoB6nP74Li7CJ9Z/wackest-video-of-the-year-its-so-cold-in-the-d.
[287] Graham, "It's Still Cold in the D for Detroit Rapper T-Baby."
[288] David Maraniss, *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story* (New York City, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 55.
[289] Bakari Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap: Who Run It?: Gangsta Rap and Visions of Black Violence* (Chicago, Illinois: Third World Press, 1995), 8-10.

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auto industry jobs were decentralized out of Detroit proper when several large factories such as Ford's River Rouge plant shut down and new factories outside of the city center were built in places such as Plymouth and Wixom. Detroit had been functionally abandoned and left to become a symbol of urban decay by the end of the twentieth century. Detroit holds a unique position in America of a city that relied chiefly on one industry, and when that industry collapsed, the people who lived in the once bustling metropolis were left to fend for themselves.[290]

Fending for themselves looked different for many people. Some turned to crime (property crime as well as violent crime) to provide for their families or themselves, and some turned to other means of self-sufficiency, like music. Often, these means of self-preservation intersected, which resulted in the "hustle culture" that pervades the genre of rap. This research will focus specifically on how the rap music produced by Black Detroiters in the 1980s and 1990s reacted to hustle culture. This research, while exploring the economic situation of Detroit as reflected in this music, will also examine the rap music produced in these decades through a gendered lens. The way men and women reacted to Detroit's situation was often different, and the history of women's employment and reaction to, as well as representation in, Detroit's rap scene will be examined. This essay will explore the history of women's employment through the decades in Detroit and take this into account when examining the differences in gendered representation in rap music.

This research aims to use the economic situation of Detroit as a tool to examine Black Detroiters response as indicative of the larger Black experience in America during this period and will explore how economic stagnation affected the Black community specifically in Detroit. By using Detroit as a case study, this research will determine if Detroit has unique qualities or is in a unique situation as an abandoned city that produces a different outcome, as well as how these rappers attempted to improve the conditions in Detroit that materially affect them.

Furthermore, this article will employ Critical Discourse Analysis in order to examine how the voices of Detroiters exemplify resistance against systems of power in society. The

[290] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 6-136.

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rap artists of Detroit participated in a discourse that not only represented the underlying political and societal powers that kept them systematically oppressed, it also was used as a tool of social action. These artists, through their music as well as political and social activism, shaped the social discourse. Ruth Wodak's work in Critical Discourse Analysis is heavily influential on this study. I borrow Wodak's idea of "socio-diagnostic critique" to uncover and situate the discourse of Detroit's rap artists within the broader political, social, and economic context of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.[291]

This article is structured into several sections based on thematic scope. I begin by offering a literature review of not only pieces of Critical Discourse Analysis, but also the historiography of Detroit's rise and fall. I also establish a musicological and sociological background that informs the study of rap as a tool of social discourse and change. I explore the methodologies that inform this research, and finally, I will critically examine the lyrics of specific songs and the lives of the artists who wrote them to understand the discourse of Detroit's economic situation.

2. Rap in Resistance

There has been much research done on Detroit's fall into urban decay, notably by authors David Maraniss and Thomas Sugrue. There has also been some work on musicians that have come out of Detroit, but none have focused on the specific musicology of rappers of the 1980s and 1990s in Detroit. Several of the scholars cited in this research disagree on the best ways to categorize rap music. Sociologist Jennifer Lena claims that there are thirteen subgenres of rap.[292] Maulana Karenga says there are five archetypes, player/lover, gangster, teacher, fun lover, and religious; while Bakari Kitwana says there are three categories: recreational, conscious, and sex-violence.[293] This research follows what Kitwana categorizes as conscious, Karenga categorizes as gangster, and Lena categorizes as race rap. This genre

[291] Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach," essay, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Micheal Meyer (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 63.
[292] Jennifer C. Lena, "Social context and musical content of rap music, 1979-1995," *Social Forces* 85, no. 1 (2006): 2.
[293] Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap,* 34.

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of music is marked by lyrics that use the artists personal experience to call attention to (often political) issues that affect their everyday life.

Theresa Martinez studies rap as resistance to dominant groups in her article "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap as Resistance". In her work, she studies East and West Coast gangsta/political rap artists NWA and Public Enemy, and how their lyrics reflect the issues Black populations were facing, such as police brutality and a betrayal by healthcare systems.[294] Sociologist Jennifer Lena also studies rap lyrics and how they relate to the manner in which the songs are produced, whether the artist was under a contract with a record label or producing independently.[295] The label system of producing records has caused rap music to become more commercial and sanitized in recent years, as Lena argues, but the music under question in this research is, for the most part, separate from the major label system. I draw on the methodologies adopted by Martinez and Lena, and combine them to produce a work that centers Critical Discourse Analysis.

A key article on the topic of sampling in Detroit's music scene is "Race, Class, and Place in the Origins of Techno and Rap Music" by William Tsitsos. This article "compares historical accounts of the origins of techno and rap music to show how race interacted with place, as well as with social class, to produce two different musical styles."[296] Sampling holds a significant place in both genres. My work borrows from this article to explore the idea of sampling as a method of music-making for the economically disadvantaged. This has intersections with the "hustle culture" theme of my research.

Another piece that focuses heavily on the music of Detroit is the book *Heaven was Detroit: from Jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond,* an essay compilation edited by M.L. Liebler. It looks at Detroit's musical history from the Jazz Age in the 1920s to the popularization of hip hop in the late twentieth century. However, it does not focus on what is different about Detroit, and it is not interested in the unique culture that Detroit has cultivated over the decades. Rather than make a cohesive argument about Detroit itself, these essays chronicle

[294] Theresa A. Martinez, "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap as Resistance," *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 2 (1997): 265.
[295] Martinez, "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture", 1.
[296] William Tsitsos, "Race, Class, and Place in the Origins of Techno and Rap Music," *Popular Music and Society* 41, no. 3 (May 27, 2018): 270.

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moments in time of famous Detroit musicians.[297] This book states that during the early decades of the twentieth century, the Black population of Detroit created a unique local community surrounding music, and that culture survives to this day. This paper builds on this idea of a specific and unique local culture that was cultivated in Detroit and transforms it into an analysis of the discourse formed by these musicians.

This research is also informed by the many reports and articles written about the presence of police in Detroit, and more specifically about police violence in the city. The history of contentious relations between police and Detroit's Black population goes back to the nineteenth century, as detailed in the article "Public Order and the Geography of the City: Crime, Violence, and the Police in Detroit, 1845–1875" by John Schneider.[298] There are many reasons that the police's interactions with the Black population of Detroit have been so contentious for the entire history of Black Americans' presence in the city, and those reasons, along with the resulting response in rap music, will be explored in this research.

The topic of policing meets a Marxist lens in the articles "Fiscal Politics and the Police: Detroit, 1928-1976" by Colin Loftin and David McDowell, as well as "Policing the Poor in Detroit" by Mark Jay. These articles explore issues like the effects of the Detroit race riot of 1967 on the numbers of police in the city, how Detroit's labour history intersects with policing, and how the economic stagnation of the city disproportionately affects its Black citizens. These issues compound to create the environment in which many Detroiters felt compelled to express themselves through music. As is often the case, many factors combined create the environment that allowed rap music to flourish in the city over the decades.

The historiography of labour in Detroit is vast, often focusing on the automotive manufacturing industry and its fall. The origin and collapse of the auto industry are well documented in the wider historiography. Detroit's position as a major city with such a notable climb and fall makes it a rich topic to mine. Many articles and books focus on the

[297] Michael L. Liebler and Dave Marsh, *Heaven Was Detroit: From Jazz to Hip-Hop and Beyond* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 24.
[298] John C. Schneider, "Public Order and the Geography of the City: Crime, Violence, and the Police in Detroit, 1845–1875," *Journal of Urban History* 4, no. 2 (February 1, 1978): 183–208. doi:10.1177/009614427800400203. 193

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industrial aspects of the city, with works such as "'Detroit the Dynamic': The Industrial History of Detroit from Cigars to Cars" by Charles K. Hyde, "'Let's Make Detroit a Union Town': The History of Labor and the Working Class in the Motor City" by Mike Smith, and including some with a gendered lens, such as '"The Paralysis of the Labor Movement': Men, Masculinity, and Unions in 1920s Detroit" by Gregory Wood. There is somewhat of a cross-section between the studies of racial and gender-based labour history in Kevin Boyle's article "The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory". It focuses on how "racial and gender constructs helped to shape working class identities and how those identities physically divided workers, privileging white labour over black, male labour over female."[299] The article also explores how racial and gender identities are intertwined with workers' struggles for empowerment. This article will be exceptionally useful in this research, as it will be able to inform the history of how the aspects of gender and race conflict in Detroit's labourers. It will also help form the background of Detroit's workers' search for empowerment through work and money. These articles focus on a gendered perspective of Detroit's labour history, but there has not been a substantial exploration of how Detroit's labour history has informed the subsequent gendered nature of the "hustle culture" endemic to the city. There has been some substantial historical research done on women's labour in Detroit. Holly Karibo has done much work studying the illicit avenues of work that women participated in in the Detroit-Windsor borderland area. The study of sex work, while present in the wide literature, will not be explored in this article. While gendered perspectives of labour are not new, this research will combine the study of lyrics as discourse and the gendered perspective on labour in Detroit. On the topic of women's history, there are also several works of Critical Discourse Analysis that study women's roles in rap music videos, which, while interesting and worthy of study, are also not the main focus of this work.

In order to effectively analyze the lyrics of the rap songs that were produced in Detroit during this era, this article will follow approaches and borrow methodology from sociologist Theresa Martinez and musicologist Jennifer Lena to analyze how lyrical content

[299] Kevin Boyle, "The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 496–523. https://doi.org/10.2307/2952568. 498.

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in rap was used as a reaction to social inequity. This essay will also examine the industrial history of the city to better understand its specific circumstances. It will not focus on nonblack rappers like Eminem, despite his mainstream popularity.[300] Otherwise, this study will look at the many factors that went into the development of Detroit's rap scene and why it is demographically significant. After the mass job loss following the collapse of Detroit's automotive sector, male and female workers were affected differently. This separation will be explored in this research. Specifically, this essay will examine key historical circumstances of Detroit, such as the downfall of the automotive industry in the city, systematic methods of discrimination that affect the Black population of Detroit, and the culture that stemmed from these factors.

The downfall of the auto industry, as it has been mentioned, created an environment that allowed crime to become increasingly prominent in the city. As a result, police have a large role to play in poor Detroiters' lives, and ergo, their music. The temporal focus of this research, the 1980s and 1990s, is important here, as gang-related violent crime peaked in Detroit in 1991.[301] Concurrently, the mid-1990s were also an extremely challenging time for many Detroiters economically, since, as an outcome of "tough on crime" policy, many Detroiters had been arrested on drug charges. These Detroiters no longer qualified for government aid, even though it is disproportionately difficult for convicted criminals to hold employment.[302] Gang affiliation was rampant in Detroit during this time. Sociological works such as "Recruitment to a Youth Gang" by John W.C. Johnstone detail how gang recruitment is targeted at vulnerable youth between the ages of 12 and 14, and gangs use strategies like promising safety and a source of income to convince potential gang members to join.[303] Gang culture is closely related to hustle culture, as gang members often facilitate the sale of drugs as a source of income. However, this is not a particularly safe method of making

[300] See Bakari Kitwana's article *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005) for a succinct criticism of including nonblack rappers in the study of hip-hop as a genre.
[301] Ronald Chepesiuk, *The War on Drugs: An International Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 1999), 269.
[302] Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 8.
[303] John W.C. Johnstone, "Recruitment to a Youth Gang," *Youth & Society* 14, no. 3 (March 1983): 284, https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x83014003002

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money, and disputes between gangs can result in a war.[304] The strategy of gangs recruiting young men in economic insecurity targets the same demographic that is highly impressionable and could try to repeat what was done by older men in their lives.[305] In Detroit, educating oneself out of poverty is incredibly difficult, as from 1979 to 2013, Michigan increased spending on schools by 18%, but increased spending on prisons and corrections by 219%. This causes a vicious cycle in which young Detroiters, without an education, were forced "to try to survive in a dangerous illegal drug economy and, in turn, were heavily policed and incarcerated in historically unparalleled numbers."[306] By examining these circumstances, this research will function to promote a better understanding of how Detroit's specific situation manifests in the work of musicians.

Finally, this article is influenced by theories in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis. There has been some work done on rap music as critical race discourse, such as Daniella Hodge's dissertation *African American Identities and Communicative Practices in Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture: A Critical Race Discourse Analysis*, and Leslie Colima and Diego Cabezas' article, "Analysis of Social Rap as a Political Discourse of Resistance," which examines the phenomenon of social rap as political protest in a Chilean context. I have also observed that there is a degree of gendered perspectives on this topic, but they tend to be focused on gendered representation and expression in music videos or on objectification in lyrics and imagery, not based on gendered expressions of "hustling" or labour. Rap is not always an expression of social and political dissatisfaction, and when it is not, it often falls into the same expressions of "hustling," of self-aggrandizement and posturing. Though these ideas are connected, gender has a fascinating presence in both modes. Women are often used as props for men to express their masculinity or sexual success, at the expense of women's autonomy, as discussed by Sakhiseni Joseph Yende in the article "A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Influence of Contemporary Hip-Hop Music Video on Gender-Based Violence."

This research is an examination of modern culture and social issues because of the ways that rap music has come to represent social issues have not changed since the 1980s,

[304] Chepesiuk, *The War on Drugs*, 105.
[305] Johnstone, "Recruitment to a Youth Gang," 285.
[306] Thompson, *Whose Detroit,* 9.

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that fills a gap in the literature since I believe that Detroit has not been given adequate attention, especially in the gendered aspect of Detroit's labour history. The issues that were pervasive in the end of the twentieth century are still present today. It is important to examine how contemporary social issues manifest in the music people listen to, as well as other forms of pop culture.

This research will employ several methods and theories to approach the topic. By looking at responses to Detroit's social issues on a case-by-case basis, this essay will take a bottom-up approach to how the problems of Detroit affected its Black population.

It will also take a musicological approach by examining the lyrics of songs written by Detroiters that address the issues of unemployment, poverty, and gang violence. In the period under question, a popular trend in rap production was the heavy use of sampling. Through the musicological approach, this essay will also examine if aspects of music production, such as sampling other pieces of music, represents Detroit's music scene any differently.

The songs chosen were selected for their lyrical content, which reflects the economic and social struggles faced by marginalized communities, particularly in Detroit. These tracks highlight themes of systemic oppression, survival through underground economies, and resistance against institutional failures. The song "Mass Confusion" by Kaos & Mystro addresses the chaos and violence that individuals experience in their communities, emphasizing how gang involvement is often driven by necessity rather than choice. It serves as a reflection of how systemic neglect and social instability push individuals toward gang life as a means of survival. The lyrics of "Keep It On The Low" by Proof underscore the reality of living in poverty, where secrecy and discretion are necessary for survival. The song illustrates the struggles of individuals navigating life in marginalized communities while also critiquing the systems that leave them with limited opportunities. "Crack Attack" by Reverend Lowdown critiques the devastating impact of the crack epidemic on Black communities. It highlights how government policies and law enforcement disproportionately criminalized these communities while failing to address the root causes of substance abuse and economic deprivation. "What is Legal" by Awesome Dré & The Hardcore Committee explicitly calls out racial injustice within the legal system. The line

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"You're guilty if you walk in the court with a Black face" points to the systemic biases in criminal justice. Additionally, the song connects historical injustices, such as land theft from Indigenous peoples to contemporary struggles, making it a powerful critique of structural racism. "Broker than Broke" by Pooc E. Capone captures the economic hardships faced by many residents of Detroit, illustrating how financial insecurity forces individuals into informal or illegal economies. The lyrics resonate with broader discussions about wealth disparity and economic disenfranchisement. "Progress of Elimination" by Boss highlights themes of struggle and resilience, addressing the pressures faced by those attempting to escape cycles of poverty and violence. The track is relevant to this study because it provides insight into the limited options available to marginalized individuals and how these constraints shape their life choices. Finally, "Hustlin' Hoochie" by Smiley makes a direct reference to Detroit's employment crisis, shedding light on how economic instability forces people to adopt alternative means of survival. Smiley's lyrics provide a firsthand account of the economic desperation that fuels underground economies, reinforcing the broader theme of systemic failure.

The analysis of these songs focuses on lyrical content, historical context, and socio-political themes. By examining how artists convey their lived experiences and critique systemic oppression, this study aims to highlight the role of hip-hop as a form of resistance and storytelling. These songs serve as primary sources that document the struggles, resilience, and political consciousness of communities often overlooked in mainstream discourse. In order to understand these Detroiters' responses to their social and political circumstances, it is firstly imperative to outline the background of Detroit's history as an industry city.

3. The Great Migration, the Auto Industry, and White Flight

Detroit's large Black population stems from the Great Migration, a period of mass movement of African Americans from the south to urban centers of the north owing to systemic racial inequality pervasive in southern states. Unfortunately, they were unable to escape racial discrimination entirely, as Detroit and other northern cities had their own racist practices and policies that would make life difficult for those hoping to improve their

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quality of life or situation. Detroit's Black population increased from 1.2% to 4.1% in the years between 1910 and 1920 and even rose to 44.5% by 1970. The majority of African Americans in Detroit found blue collar jobs to support themselves, and for men, they were primarily in the automotive manufacturing industry.[307]

Beginning in the 1950s, automobile manufacturers began decentralizing industrial work from the urban center of Detroit to the suburban areas surrounding it. These suburban areas were populated mostly by whites. As automotive jobs and opportunities for housing sponsored by the New Deal appeared in the areas outside of Detroit, these jobs and opportunities disappeared from the urban center. African Americans also were prevented from gaining access to New Deal benefits, and this only widened the gap between them and Detroit's white population. Automation was also a large contributing factor in the loss of jobs during this period, with over 4000 jobs automated away in Detroit-area Ford plants between 1951 and 1953. The strength of labour unions and the high wages associated with them was an additional reason for manufacturers to divest from Detroit. Detroit lost nearly 130,000 auto manufacturing jobs between 1948 and 1967. This mass job loss mainly affected the Black population of the city, with nearly 20 percent of Black autoworkers losing their jobs, compared to 5 percent of whites. This crisis of employment only worsened in later decades, with 56 percent of the Black population unemployed in 1980 compared to 28 percent in 1950.[308]

The demographics of job loss within the Black community become more specific. Auto workers during this period were majority male, with increasing numbers of women joining factory work during World War II. Before the mass addition of women to the industry, they could supplement the household income with "daywork" in the domestic sphere, a contribution which often went unacknowledged.[309] Even when women did work in the factories, seniority rules were designed to keep Black workers and women in the jobs they always held and prevented their promotion. Women's work vs men's work was even

[307] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis,* 23.
[308] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis,* 128-151.
[309] Kyle E. Ciani, "Hidden Laborers: Female Day Workers in Detroit, 1870-1920," The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 4, no. 1 (2005), 28.

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upheld within the same factory, and women's work mimicked domestic work.[310] Despite this boom of women joining the auto industry, where "at the peak of wartime employment in 1944, 43% of the 13,500 workers were women," by January 1946, only 4% of all Ford employees working in company plants were women.[311]Therefore, job loss in the fall of Detroit's auto industry hit women earlier, and they mostly transitioned to domestic work, either in the home or paid work outside of the home. The bulk of the job loss in the closing of the Detroit factories were men. This resulted in the greater percentage of men finding means of sustenance through crime and music.

Regarding Detroit's labour, while the racial split of auto workers was not exactly equal, white workers still largely outnumbered Black workers, it was much more proportional compared to the police force. In the early 1960s, Black people represented 25% of Detroit's population, and between one and fifty percent of auto workers, depending on the plant. This discrepancy largely relied on hiring practices of individual factories.[312] While some plants could have as much as half of its population being Black, Detroit's police force was not nearly so diverse. Policing was largely a white career, with Black officers taking up only 3% of the force.[313] Following affirmative action put in place in 1978 by Detroit's first Black mayor, Coleman Young (1974-1997), the DPD slowly began increasing its number of Black officers. Affirmative action had the goal of increasing the effectiveness of policing in the city, and by 1993, "the DPD finally reached a 50-50 split between white and black officers, including those in leadership positions."[314] As automotive jobs for Black workers decreased, the DPD was hiring more Black officers, not only due to affirmative action after the mid-1970s, but also due to a larger desire for policing in an increasingly crime-riddled city.

Women also joined the DPD in increased numbers during these years. Arta Barron-Hopes was one of the first female officers hired in 1952. Despite the appearance of gender equality, women were relegated to "Women's Divisions," which dealt with sex crimes and

[310] Boyle, "The Kiss", 507, 505.
[311] Nancy Gabin, "'They Have Placed a Penalty on Womanhood': The Protest Actions of Women Auto Workers in Detroit-Area UAW Locals, 1945-1947," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1982), 376.
[312] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis,* 98.
[313] "Affirmative Action," Crackdown: Policing Detroit through the War on Crime, Drugs, and Youth, 2019.
[314] "Affirmative Action," Crackdown: Policing Detroit through the War on Crime, Drugs, and Youth, 2019.

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child abuse cases, until the 1970s when they were allowed to work with the general police population.[315] While policing became a viable career for larger portions of the population, these jobs did not make up for the larger job loss in Detroit that came as a consequence of the collapse of the automotive manufacturing industry. In fact, "in the late 1960s, the average pay for a patrolman nationally was 33% less than what was needed to sustain a family of four in moderate circumstances in a large city."[316] In the years after the 1967 riots, there was an increase from about 20 officers per 100,000 people, to almost 90 officers per 100,000.[317] Though this does not necessarily mean DPD was hiring hundreds more police officers, rather, this number reflects the shrinking population of Detroit *combined* with added precautions against Detroit's rising crime rate. These affirmative action policies were intended to increase trust in the DPD, as there was a problem with mistrust in the police system resulting in a lack of reporting of crimes. There was a desire to build relationships between the community and the police; however, instead "it dramatically increased police presence in neighbourhoods, especially low-income African American neighbourhoods."[318] This reflects the state of Detroit during these decades. As Detroiters were struggling with economic stagnation and unemployment, many turned to other means of sustenance. As unemployment rose, so did Detroit's crime rate. As these means of sustenance arose, like career crime and rap (both "hustles"), the culture of gangster rap can be found.[319] A hallmark of gangster rap, as seen in the repertoire of NWA and Public Enemy is a distrust of police, which is curiously not as prominent in the rap that can be found in Detroit during this time. Despite the police having a comparable police presence in low-income neighbourhoods to cities like Los Angeles and New York, anti-police sentiment is notably less present in Detroit's rap of the 1980s and 1990s. There is a notable anecdote from the Detroit stop on NWA's tour in 1989: "just singing a few lines of [Fuck the Police] at Detroit's

[315] "DPD's First Female Officers Honored," CBS News, November 9, 2010.
[316] Dennis A. Deslippe, "'Do Whites Have Rights?': White Detroit Policemen and 'Reverse Discrimination' Protests in the 1970s," The Journal of American History 91, no. 3 (2004): 939.
[317] McDowall, David, and Colin Loftin, "Fiscal Politics and the Police: Detroit, 1928-76," *Social Forces* 65, no. 1 (1986), 168. https://doi.org/10.2307/2578940.
[318] "Police/Community Relations," Crackdown: Policing Detroit through the War on Crime, Drugs, and Youth, 2019, https://policing.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/crackdowndetroit/page/ramifications-of-young-s-policies1#:~:text=The%20significance%20of%20building%20relationships,mini%2Dstations%20is%20partially%20misdirected.
[319] Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 19.

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Joe Louis arena caused the Motor City police to rush the stage … 'We just wanted to show the kids,' an officer told the Hollywood Reporter, 'that you can't say 'fuck the police' in Detroit.'"[320] In 1993, police brutality was such a problem in the city that, in light of many lawsuits against the police, a study was conducted with the goal of reducing police violence.[321] A heavy police presence due to the high crime rate in Detroit may discourage open dissent, which could make the performer a target. Governor John Engler followed a "tough on crime" stance when he assumed his role in 1991, and the policy and following reputation earned him a shoutout in Smiley's song "Hustlin' Hoochie."[322]

4. Detroit Rap Artists' Responses to Unemployment and Hustle Culture in Lyrics

Much of the political/gangster rap that came out of these decades in Detroit directly or indirectly addresses the issues of unemployment, economic insecurity, and the culture of hustling. "Keep It On The Low" by Proof, "Broker than Broke" by Pooc E. Capone, and "Progress of Elimination" by Boss reference the need to hustle to survive. A very explicit reference to the employment crisis in Detroit appears in Smiley's song "Hustlin' Hoochie," where she raps: "Ain't no jobs in Detroit, and that's a fact/Governor Engels made damn sure of that." Smiley continues, lamenting the "Detroit mentality" and expressing dissatisfaction with the idea of hustling until she dies.[323]

Smiley and Boss represent the smaller number of women who attempted to make a living through rap in Detroit during these decades. The low ratio of women to men in the industry can be attributed to the type of work women historically had in Detroit, being homemakers and domestic workers rather than working in the auto industry and thus did not have the same desire to "hustle" as much as men did after the fall of the automotive industry. The ones that did enter the music industry, though, faced more roadblocks than

[320] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*
[321] "Use of Force Study", Crackdown: Policing Detroit through the War on Crime, Drugs, and Youth, 2019, https://policing.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/crackdowndetroit/page/ramifications-of-young-s-policies1#:~:text=The%20significance%20of%20building%20relationships,mini%2Dstations%20is%20partially%20misdirected.
[322] "Hustlin' Hoochie," track 1 on Smiley, *Hustlin' Hoochie*, Bryant Records, 1992.
[323] "Hustlin' Hoochie," track 1 on Smiley, *Hustlin' Hoochie*, Bryant Records, 1992.

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their male counterparts. Contemporary Detroit rapper DeJ Loaf (née Deja Trimble) commented on the lack of support women get from men, saying: "That's my thing, 'cause a lot of guys don't listen to girls' music. They're not gonna ride around in the car listening to certain females."[324] Listening to music made by women was seen as emasculating, and women were not supposed to interfere in a masculine sphere. Nevertheless, these women also had to feed themselves and had as much of a desire for self-sufficiency as men. Several of the rappers mentioned faced economic hardship early in life, as well as ones not mentioned, like Esham, AWOL, and K-Town.[325] Interestingly, Boss (née Lichelle Laws) received criticism for posturing as someone from a low-income background, when she really grew up middle class and attended college.[326] Often, the rappers that are successful enough to be remembered were so because they had advantages that others did not. Proof grew up with a single mother because his father left to pursue a career as a music producer before he was born, yet his father was extremely successful and worked with Marvin Gaye.[327] Many of the Detroiters who attempted to escape poverty through music will be forgotten.

In order to escape from this poverty, many Detroiters turned to gang activity to supplement their income. Gang affiliation is extremely common for Black male youth in urban areas with a high rate of poverty, such as Detroit. Gang recruitment is extremely effective in Detroit, where single-income households or households generally in poverty are higher than most of the nation.[328] Many Black youth become involved with gangs as a means of self-sufficiency, and music can both supplement and reflect this involvement. Many rappers from Detroit were involved in gangs and this is shown in their representations of gang life in their music. The songs "Mass Confusion" by Kaos & Mystro, "Keep It On The

[324] Steven J. Horowitz, "'Try Me' Rapper Dej Loaf: 'What I'm Doing Hasn't Been Done,'" Billboard, November 10, 2014, https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/rapper-dej-loaf-interview-6312219/
[325] Mickey Hess, ed., *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010), 405-421.
[326] Brian Smith, "Same as the Old Boss," Detroit Metro Times, June 16, 2004. https://www.metrotimes.com/music/same-as-the-old-boss-2178805?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.metrotimes.com%2Fstory.asp%2Fid%3D6344.
[327] Gil Kaufman, "Proof: 'Eminem's Best Friend' And A Vital Member of Detroit's Hip-Hop Scene," *MTV* (Viacom, April 11, 2006), https://www.mtv.com/news/bxu21v/proof-eminems-best-friend-and-a-vital-member-of-detroits-hip-hop-scene.
[328] Karen Bouffard, "Census Bureau: Detroit is the Poorest Big City in the U.S.," The Detroit News (Detroit News, September 17, 2015), https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/09/16/census-us-uninsured-drops-income-stagnates/32499231/.

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Low" by Proof, and "Crack Attack" by Reverend Lowdown all refer to committing gang violence to survive. Some of the rappers that were involved with gangs made political points in their music about how they were compelled to join a gang because of failures by the system to protect them, and how that system then punished them for that. In "What is Legal" by Awesome Dré & The Hardcore Committee, Dré raps: "You're guilty if you walk in the court with a black face… We used to sell it, that makes us the victim … they land the victim in jail or hell."[329] He goes on to state how issues affecting Black populations are also reflected in the treatment of Indigenous American populations. Dré uses his music as a means to express his anger with the system that disproportionately punishes, and has failed, the Black population of Detroit. In a voice clip introduction before the song begins, Dré included a sample of an interviewer saying that around a third of rappers are involved in gang or drug trade. This is an example of the common practice of sampling.

Sampling has been a large part of rap music since the 1970s when it originated in New York City. For these early innovators, sampling made the process of creating rap beats much easier. For up-and-coming producers in recent years, the practice continues even though producing is comparably much less labour intensive with new technologies. Yet, in the early days of rap, when vinyl records were the common method of sharing music, sampling was the fastest and cheapest way to make new beats. For Detroiters specifically, this low-cost way of producing music was crucial, as many did not have the resources for more expensive methods of producing in the post-industrial period of the city. In Detroit, the genre of house, for example, was characterized by machine-like techno music with minimal human presence, reflecting the city's auto-manufacturing industry changing from human-operated to mechanized and automatized.[330] While house music developed separately from rap, the same circumstances of the city are reflected in both genres. Sampling was crucial to the poorer musicians of Detroit, who had to make their living off whatever they could, like music, and often gang activity. Specifically in Detroit during the 1980s, the Chamber Brothers gang was extremely prolific in the supply and sale of crack

[329] "What is Legal," track 4 on Awesome Dré and the Hard Core Committee, *A.D's Revenge*, Strictly Roots Recordings, 1993.
[330] Tsitsos, "Race, Class, and Place in the Origins of Techno and Rap Music," 273.

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cocaine in the city, and at its peak, making 1 million a week.[331] Dré's acknowledgement of this is a powerful statement of what life is like for the Black working poor in Detroit. As many of the rappers mentioned have stated, it was difficult to get by without getting involved in crime. This results in many of the aspiring rappers out of the city using their criminal activity as point of self-aggrandizement, both for money and status among their peers.

5. Conclusion

Beyond participating in hustle culture, some of these artists have become involved in various ways with trying to improve life in Detroit by preventing more youths from falling into a life of crime. Teferi "Kaos" Brent of Mystro & Kaos parents' were auto industry workers and spent a lot of time with gangs as a teen, which influenced his musical career, as mentioned previously.[332] He is also extremely involved with activism, becoming a minister after his rap career and now works frequently with Detroit's youth.[333] We Found Hip Hop is a Detroit-based foundation that focuses on helping women develop a career as hip hop artists by providing resources and mentorship.[334] In the decades following the 1990s, there has been a boom in the numbers of female rappers coming out of the city. Another project, The Foundation, started in 2009, focused on female performers with the goal of promoting the female artists in the city.[335]

The lyrics in these songs often reflect a need to survive by any means necessary, whether it be by making music, becoming involved in a gang, or "hustling" in another way. Detroit has a unique story of how a once prosperous city abandoned its people. Due to white flight and decentralization of industry, Detroit's poverty is notable when compared to other cities because of its sharp population decrease in the twentieth century. However, the

[331] Chepesiuk, *The War on Drugs*, 35.
[332] Hess, *Hip Hop in America,* 407.
[333] Dave Spencer, "New Detroit Shot-Stopper Program Pays $700K to Community Leaders Who Reduce Violence," FOX 2 Detroit (FOX, March 9, 2023), https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/new-detroit-shot-stopper-program-pays-700k-to-community-leaders-who-reduce-violence.
[334] "We Found Hip Hop: About Us," We Found Hip Hop, accessed March 30, 2023, https://wefoundhiphop.com/about/.
[335] Rob Boffard, "Detroit's Women Rappers: 'It's Time for Us to Take Control,'" The Guardian, June 9, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/09/women-rappers-detroit-hiphop-invincible.

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songs discussed above and their lyrical content are not especially unique to Detroit, unless they specifically reference it, like in Smiley's "Hustlin' Hoochie." Many rappers of the period between 1980 and 2000 expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo, no matter their city of origin. Los Angeles and New York had no shortage of gangster rappers writing lyrics about how they came from nothing.[336] Besides Detroit, Appalachia also has its own distinct identity expressed in hip hop music that also focuses on the issues endemic to the (also historically poor) region.[337] Further research of this topic could entail exploring immigration from the South bringing their style of music to the North, as well as working class solidarity between musical artists from Appalachia and Detroit.[338] Detroit is the ideal city for this kind of study, though, not because it is especially different or unique from other cities across America, but because its conditions are emblematic of many of the issues facing Black Americans. The economic stagnation of these decades hit Detroit particularly hard because of its already vulnerable state after a mass job loss. While Detroit's story is undoubtedly profound and interesting, the rappers that came from there are no less so simply because they follow conventions that are common across the genre.

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[336] Martinez, "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture", 265.
[337] Todd Snyder, "Rappalachia: The Performance of Appalachian Identity in Hip Hop Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music*, ed. Jason Lee Oakes and Justin D Burton, Online (Oxford University Press, 2018).
[338] Songs such as "Detroit" by Tyler Childers, "One Piece at a Time" by Johnny Cash, and "Detroit City" by Dean Martin are examples of this.

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