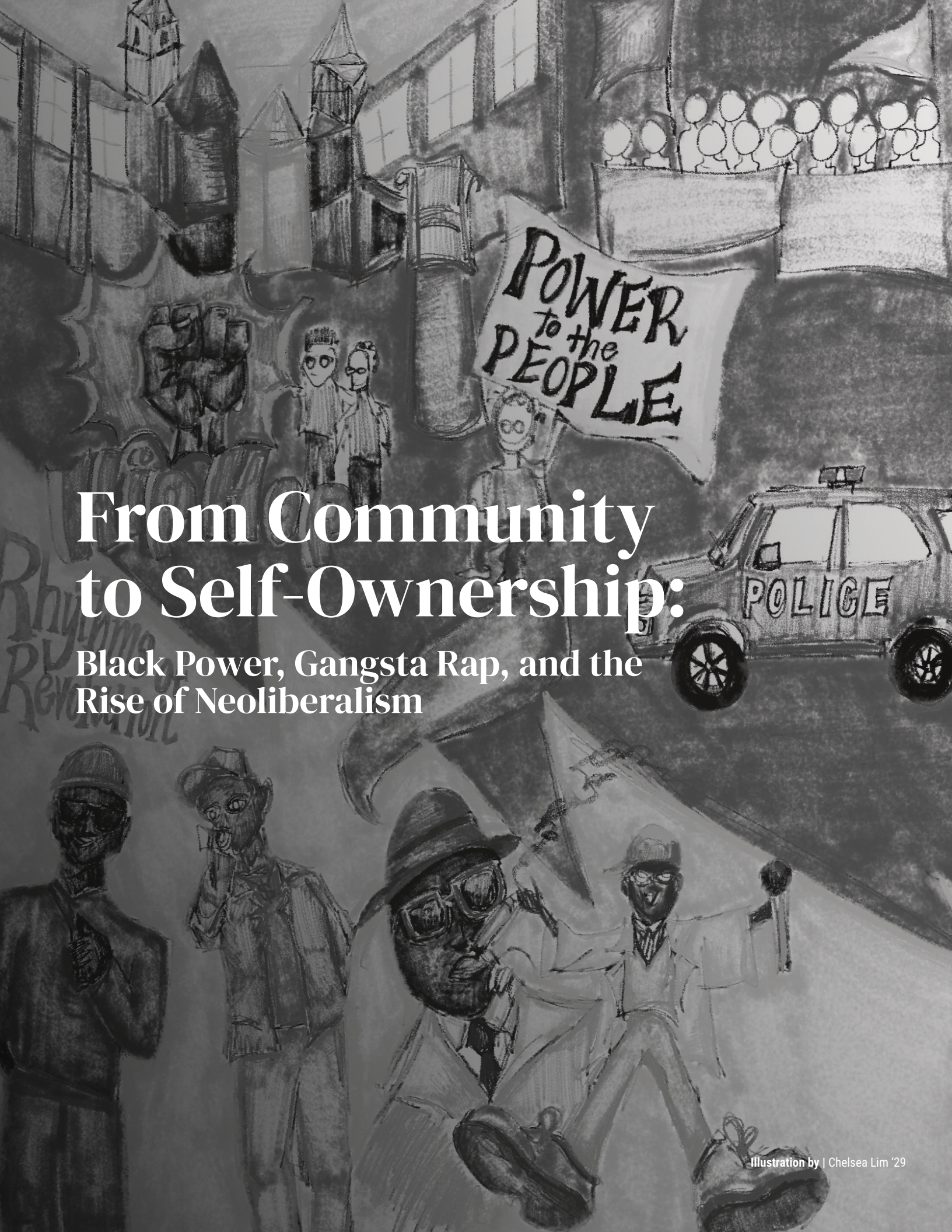

From Community to Self-Ownership:

Black Power, Gangsta Rap, and the Rise of Neoliberalism

Illustration by | Chelsea Lim '29

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

From Community to Self-Ownership: Black Power, Gangsta Rap, and the Rise of Neoliberalism

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How should we think of the relationship between Black Power and Gangsta rap? Scholars have long debated the relations between the two, largely dividing into two extremes: one faction positions both as generally progressive experiments that sought to spatially reclaim their communities from neglect and over-policing, while the other presents Black Power as a collective progressive movement and Gangsta rap as one focused on neoliberal entrepreneurialism. This paper seeks to address the tension between these two schools and articulate a more nuanced viewpoint, focusing on the Black Panthers of Oakland, California (1966-1982) as a representative of Black Power, and the music group NWA of Compton, California (1988-1991) as a representative of Gangsta rap, deploying a narrative analysis within the same region. In comparing the two, a shift is observed from Black Power's vision of communal ownership to ownership of oneself in the streets in Gangsta rap. Ownership, in this paper, is articulated in spatial terms, referring to control of the boundaries of a thing as well as possession of the thing itself. The transition from visions of communal ownership to self-ownership occurred as deindustrialization eroded the economic infrastructure of the Black community and evolving policing practices undermined its spatial autonomy, rendering its physical borders porous. Both frameworks retained a militarized logic, focused on protecting territorial boundaries and waging continual battles with the police. Thus, the convergence of self-ownership with entrepreneurial values in Gangsta rap—as seen in both the conduct of its rap stars as well as the genre's more materialistic lyrics—allowed for a synthesis of Black Power aesthetics and a neoliberal future. Ultimately, this analysis positions Gangsta rap within the broader category of fusionism—a label applied by historians to describe movements that reconciled pre-neoliberal structures with free-market values and paved the way for a neoliberal age.

What is the relationship between Black Power and Gangsta rap? The Black Power movement flourished in the 1960s and 1970s amid ongoing issues in Black communities following the passage of civil rights legislation, including urban deprivation due to unequal housing policies and over-policing in response to poverty. Channeling a Black nationalist vision, it focused on building community-directed social programs and self-defense forces against the police within Black communities (Joseph). Gangsta rap emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, celebrating the "gangster" archetype that emerged in the context of rising crime due to deindustrialization and austerity (Quinn). Scholars have long debated the relations between the two and largely sorted themselves into two extremes: one camp positions both as generally progressive experiments that sought to spatially reclaim their communities in order to address neglect and over-policing, while the other presents Black Power as a more collective progressive movement in stark contrast to gangsta rap's focus on individualistic entrepreneurialism.

Bryan J. McCann, author of *The Mark of Criminality: Rhetoric, Race, and Gangsta Rap in the War-on-Crime Era* (2017), is one such scholar who points out parallels between Black Power and Gangsta rap. In particular, McCann explores Gangsta rap through NWA, the group from Compton, Los Angeles that produced the first music of the genre in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while analyzing Black Power through the Black Panthers of Oakland, California. This local Black Power organization provided community defense forces and self-directed community programs, including food aid and medical clinics, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. According to McCann, both employed the "mark of criminality" as a form of resistance.

The "mark of criminality" was a hegemonic discourse that broadly framed the Black body as inherently criminal using three central ideas: "(1) privileging masculinity as an essential characteristic of blackness, (2) portraying Black masculinity as inherently violent, and (3) portraying Black masculinity as hypersexual" (McCann). In particular, both movements reclaimed and played up "the mark of criminality" as a means of reclaiming space and ownership within their communities in response to economic deprivation and over-policing. McCann describes how the Black Panthers' vision of communal development and community patrols that combated over-policing employed the "mark of criminality": "highly circulated images of primarily Black masculine bodies taking up arms and confronting law enforcement constituted a distinctly activist version of the mark of criminality, for they deployed discourses of Black masculinity that remained deeply tethered to violence and, as evident in such organizations' investment in normative gender roles, sexual virility" (24). Similarly, NWA, as a pioneer of Gangsta rap, embraced the mark of criminality by celebrating Compton's criminal culture, which undermined the ideological legitimacy of police in the hood and reclaimed space from their influence. According to McCann, "To celebrate Compton because of its status as the single most feared

urban space in America was an unavoidably political provocation" (46), and doing so allowed NWA to engage in a "reconfiguration of the mark of criminality as a viable threat to [police] monopoly over space and violence in the inner city" (7). For McCann, Black Power and Gangsta rap like NWA are part of one tradition of embracing the "mark of criminality" to undermine the legitimacy of policing and reclaim one's neighborhood in the process.

In *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang* (2005), cultural studies scholar Eithne Quinn advances a vision very different from McCann's, arguing that Gangsta rap had an individualistic rather than communal orientation. Quinn situates Gangsta rap as a genre that embraced an entrepreneurial, individualistic framework in response to the collapse of publicly funded opportunity in the ghetto: "For young Black men and women, the meanings of creative industry cut very deep, addressing vital issues of self-determination, achievement, income, and respect in an era that all but excluded them from jobs and resources. In the mixed-up, no-guarantees world of neoliberal America, then, Gangsta rap was energized politically by the rejection of collective protest strategies and the embrace of a ruthless drive for profit" (12). Although she does not explicitly define neoliberalism, Quinn's apparent agreement with David Harvey—who defines neoliberalism as a specific policy agenda that gained hegemony throughout the Western world in the 1980s and 1990s—helps clarify her viewpoint. According to Harvey, neoliberalism centers on the belief that individual wealth accumulation is a positive good, and thus advocates for the state to solely protect private property rights in lieu of investing in social programs available to the public at large (Harvey). Quinn discusses how this neoliberal ethos increasingly manifested, both in the behavior of Gangsta rap stars, who aligned themselves with advertisers and Republican candidates, as well as in later genres of Gangsta rap, such as g-funk, which dominated 1990s Los Angeles and explicitly celebrated bling and leisure (Quinn). Thus, for Quinn, neoliberalism is central to the story of Gangsta rap; Black communities experienced neoliberal policies and, in response, adopted the neoliberal ethos of individual advancement.

This paper seeks to resolve the tensions between scholars like McCann, who emphasize Gangsta rap's continuities with Black Power, focusing on a communal vision of self-defense, and scholars like Quinn, who situate Gangsta rap as a genre that privileged neoliberal ambition and rejected the collective goals of the Black Power movement. Like McCann, I will focus on the NWA and the Black Panthers of Oakland as representatives of these two movements, utilizing a narrative framework within a specific region (the Black West Coast) and placing them within their historical context. McCann is correct that both the Black Power movement and Gangsta rap advanced a spatial politics of ownership, but his argument requires more nuance—what were the sizes of the spaces that these movements claimed ownership of? Comparing the two, one sees a transition from visions of ownership of one's community in Black Power to ownership of oneself on the streets in Gangsta rap. Ownership, in this paper, is defined in spatial terms as the capacity to control the boundaries of a thing along with the thing itself. The shift towards self-ownership occurred as visions of communal ownership retreated as deindustrialization increasingly sapped the resources of the Black community, while more authoritarian forms of policing allowed authorities to embed themselves into the ghetto, rendering its previously solid boundaries more porous. However, there was continuity in terms of ownership being articulated through Black Power motifs, such as a military perimeter and self-defense against over-policing. Thus, as the self-ownership articulated by Gangsta rap increasingly mapped onto entrepreneurial values, as seen in both the behavior of Gangsta rap stars and more wealth-focused lyrics, it fostered a new synthesis between Black Power aesthetics and a neoliberal future.

> ***Thus, as the self-ownership articulated by Gangsta rap increasingly mapped onto entrepreneurial values, it fostered a new synthesis between Black Power aesthetics and a neoliberal future.***

Black Power advanced a vision of ownership of one's community, while Gangsta rap narrowed the focus to owning oneself on the streets. The postwar dynamic that catalyzed Black Power was especially prominent in Oakland, California, where the Black Panthers originated in the 60s and were most deeply rooted, despite having branches in other cities. The Black Power ethos of community ownership is immediately visible in the Oakland Black Panthers' 10 Point Program (1966), which articulated various demands of the federal government on behalf of the organization. Although these demands were never met, they constantly guided its vision. The program includes demands for employment, housing, and education, but it also articulates a vision of ownership of one's community by emphasizing that such resources should ideally be in the hands of and administered by historically deprived Black neighborhoods themselves. The risks of such resources remaining in the hands of wealthy white elites were that such power elites might have no economic interest in providing them to Black communities or might insidiously use them to pacify such communities and limit their aspirations. The first of these concerns is present in the demand for full employment among others where the program clarifies, "We believe that if the White American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living" (Newton). Exemplifying the second concern was the demand for a specific type of education, "We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else" (Newton). Education might be provided to the Black community, but if it did not provide them with knowledge of the structures causing their deprivation, it was a tool of pacification instead of empowerment. Concerns about the powerful, particularly white elites, not being willing to invest in or trying to dupe Black communities animated the Black Panthers and the Black Power movement's focus on ownership of their own communities.

The Panthers' broader embrace of military masculinity was part and parcel of this vision of ownership of one's community in the Black Power movement. Their vision of community ownership appeared almost like a state within a state, and the community patrols organized by the Black Panthers to defend Black communities from over-policing were designed to parallel a state's own mil-

itary. Historian Jessica C. Harris emphasizes that the Black Panthers viewed the police's relationship to the Black community as one similar to the educational establishment, which was present in the community but did not prioritize the interests of its inhabitants because it was not controlled by the community itself. She cites stories of the "failure of Southern policemen" to protect Civil Rights protestors seen on the news and "police brutalizing Oakland residents" as primary causes of the creation of the Black Panther Party (Harris). Embracing a vision of sovereignty, the Black Panther community patrols were organized similarly to a state's military, with a standardized uniform consisting of black leather and a black beret, weapons training, and an abstinence from narcotics, with orders to point only at the external enemy, the police (413). This insight will later prove important for understanding continuities between Black Power and Gangsta rap.

Although cast as a celebration of communal sovereignty by McCann, "Straight Outta Compton," the titular song of NWA's 1988 breakout album, showcases a decisive shift away from ownership of one's community and towards an individualistic concept of ownership over oneself. McCann makes his argument for the song being about reclaiming the community primarily by employing visual evidence. He focuses on how the music video is framed around a narrative of members of NWA strutting through the streets of Compton, being captured by the police, and eventually freeing themselves. At the end of the video, the police drive off, solidifying that they are not welcome in the community: "The episode comes to a close as the oblivious police drive their wagon out of the area and the posse proceeds to patrol their streets" (McCann). In focusing solely on the narrative, however, McCann overlooks the deeper structure of the song's music video. Conscious hip hop groups associated with Black Power, like Public Enemy, made videos with a lead rapper accompanied by crowds singing, chanting, and dancing, but "Straight Outta Compton" departs from that model; the track features solos by each of the group's three rappers, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Eazy E. The majority of the video focuses on the camera panning to each rapper, with the shot centered on them, and the narrative is highlighted by McCann only occurring on the sidelines (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). In each section of the video that focuses on an individual member, they pose and strut confidently amidst a dangerous environment of decaying infrastructure and fires, showcasing their ability to hold their own in such conditions, as well as an individualistic sense of ownership over themselves (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). The underlying departures of the "Straight Outta Compton" music video and its structure showcase a shift toward a sense of individualistic self-ownership.

An idea of ownership over the self also emerges in the altercations that members of NWA describe engaging in. They highlight the idea of an individual holding their own against the masses, who are generally described in pejorative terms. Ice Cube, for example, relates how he routinely fights off masses of opponents who pettily resort to starting fights with him, "[They] start to mumble, they wanna rumble, Mix 'em and cook 'em in a pot like gumbo" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). The act of mixing one's opponents in a stew highlights the contrast between an individual with ownership of themself and a morally inferior mass of enemies. However, from Ice Cube's braggadocio, it remains unclear whether the masses are exclusively Black or include the police, a question especially pertinent given the way in which Black Power erected a clear perimeter between the two groups. Eazy-E provides an answer, making clear that the mass of enemies includes both fellow members of the hood ("punk[s]" as well as police officers ("cop[s]") (NWA, "Straight Outta…"). Then, as if to emphasize that these enemies are part of the same group, he merely dives into the same formula as Ice Cube of individually confronting a morally inferior mass. He describes single-handedly evading and eliminating those who threaten him, but first he mocks their inability to locate him: "To me it's kinda funny, the attitude showing [him] driving / But don't know where the fuck he's going, just rolling" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). He contrasts their ineptitude with his stealth and skill, "Never seen like a shadow in the dark, Except when I unload" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). Departing from the barrier that the Black Panthers set around the Black community to defend the collective from over policing, NWA emphasizes a boundary around the individual, separating them from a morally inferior mass, including both police and members of the ghetto, part of a broader transition from visions of communal to individual ownership.

McCann is particularly keen to frame the lyrics of NWA through the prism of masculinity, but examining the misogyny in their lyrics also allows us to see how they use such rhetoric towards the end of articulating a concept of self-ownership instead of ownership of one's community. In particular, they do this by emphasizing how they can abuse and demean women with no consequences from the community. For example, MC Ren addresses a love interested at a show: "So if you're at a show in the front row I'ma call you a bitch or dirty-ass ho, You'll probably get mad like a bitch is supposed to, But that shows me, slut, you're composed to, A crazy motherfucker from the street" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). To be "a crazy motherfucker from the street" is to be irreproachable for misogynistic speech and MC Ren seeks a woman who will help him live out this ideal. Eazy-E also seeks a similar vision of irreproachability in abusing women, even those with families who might retaliate. He describes himself as "a brotha that'll smother yo' mother and make ya sister think I love her" (NWA, "Straight Outta. . ."). By situating the women he is abusing in terms of family relations, Eazy-E jettisons an earlier conception of patriarchy which might have involved communal aspirations of caring for and protecting women. Instead, both he and Ren deploy the patriarchy to buttress a vision of self-ownership, using it as a tool to evade these communal relations and abuse women without consequences from the community.

What's fascinating about NWA's deployment of self-ownership in "Straight Outta Compton" is that it is articulated using language similar to that of the Black Power movement, with ownership represented by a notion of military masculinity and a military perimeter. The members of NWA fashion themselves as one-man armies by depicting themselves using weapons traditionally used in group battles to settle individual disputes and articulate a sense of self-ownership. For example, Ice Cube associates an AK, an automatic rifle traditionally used in group shoot-outs, with settling individual scores. He raps, "AK-47 is the tool" before describing how he is not to be messed with, cautioning others, "Don't make me act the motherfuckin' fool, Me you can go toe to toe, no maybe, I'm knockin' [them] out tha box daily" (NWA, "Straight Outta Compton"). MC Ren also frames his use of the AK as part of an individual sense of ownership, noting that he "controls the automatic [AK]" for "[f[or any dumb motherfucker that starts static [anyone who picks a fight with him]" (NWA, "Straight Outta Compton"). In particular, the repeated mentions of the AK-47 are interesting because of the weapon's ideological associations. The creators of the music video appear to have been unable to procure one, instead displaying a handgun, lending credence to the idea that the mention of the AK is indeed an ideological one, as one could easily find one in Compton (NWA, "Straight Outta. . .").

The AK-47, produced by the Soviet Union, was, of course, a weapon designed for battle and not individual shoot-outs, but it

also symbolized popular insurgencies in the Global South, a tradition that the Black Power movement aligned itself with. Military historian Victor Davis Hanson notes, "many of the terrorist movements and insurgencies in Asia, Latin America, and especially Africa would have been impossible without the widespread dispersion of the AK-47, the ideal weapon for impoverished, poorly trained mercenaries" (Hanson). Fashioning themselves as one-man armies using revolutionary weapons, the members of NWA appropriate a motif of military masculinity and perimeter associated with Black Power and signifying ownership, this time of oneself instead of one's community. This is more complex than McCann's idea of the "mark of criminality," always including a focus on masculinity. Instead, we see the creative re-fashioning of ideas from the Black Power movement on a more individualistic basis.

"Fuck Tha Police," another song on *Straight Outta Compton*, also re-fashions Black Power rhetoric to articulate a sense of ownership over the self. McCann positions it as a song centered on communal ownership and self-defense in which "deploys the mark of criminality in ways that resonate strongly with the currents of Black and pan-African nationalisms that circulated in many activist communities during the postwar era" (McCann). And indeed, NWA frames police as invaders in the community, with NWA members detailing how police persecute minorities and lyrically staging their own mock courtroom proceedings that undermine outside authority in the community (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). However, we must also pay attention to departures from Black Power's earlier ideals of confronting the police through solidarity. Instead, the members of NWA synthesize confronting the police with an ideal of individualistic ownership of the self by challenging the police to one-on-one fights. A great example of this is MC Ren's verse, where he challenges officers harassing him to individually confront him, rapping, "But take off the gun so you can see what's up, And we'll go at it, punk, I'ma fuck you up" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). For MC Ren, resistance to police comes in goading them to abandon their collective identity and privilege, shedding their guns and badges to engage in an individual contest.

McCann frames this breaking up of police into individuals as inspiring collective resistance, alluding to Ren's statement that "[Those] on the street are the majority" (McCann, NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). However, this remark is a one-off threat. MC Ren situates his battles with the police as being motivated by a sense of self-ownership, not wanting them to "step in [his] path" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). Then, immediately after the description of the imagined fight, Ren elucidates a general principle, of holding one's own on the streets that does not even specifically mention police: "Smoke any motherfucker that sweats me, or any asshole that threatens me, I'm a sniper with a hell of a scope" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. . ."). Similarly, Ice Cube connects his fights against the police to being on an individual "warpath" and single-handedly causing a "bloodbath" (NWA, "Fuck Tha. .). Overall, NWA once again borrows a discourse associated with ownership from the Black Power movement, namely resistance against the police, but fashions that motif into advocating ownership of oneself on the streets, rather than the community as a whole.

So, what sparked the shift from ownership of the community to self-ownership? The answer lies in the economic and institutional changes that occurred in Black communities between the 1970s and the 1990s. The Black Panthers formulated their vision during a period when the ideas of public and community ownership were very possible, with the legacies of postwar prosperity and President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty Programs still fresh in the minds of Americans from all walks of life. The War on Poverty was a slew of social programs championed by the then president in the 60s to reduce the nation's poverty rate; a central component of the initiative was the creation of Community Action Agencies, organizations that administered services like educational support, job training, and food assistance and crucially were both partially run and staffed by members of the impoverished communities that they served (Torstensson). The Black Panthers and the broader Black Power movement adopted this emphasis on community direction and input; notably, the 10 Point Program advocates for government investment to establish community self-sufficiency (Newton).

However, the 1970s and 1980s brought deindustrialization, which dried up both jobs and the tax base in Black communities, thereby hampering funds for either self-directed or state-funded communal projects (Bound and Freedman; Bound and Holzer). In the same time period, the federal government pioneered increasingly punitive forms of policing as part of the closely related War on Drugs and War on Crime under various presidential administrations. These initiatives increased police budgets and powers, but they also fundamentally altered the spatiality of the ghetto, transforming it from a region with clear boundaries to a porous space that police power could constantly penetrate and appear within. Police embedded themselves deeper into communities and began subjecting residents to random searches, employing bias and disproportionately targeting minorities. In the 1980s, Los Angeles's first Black mayor, Tom Bradley, ordered the LAPD to use SWAT teams and anti-riot squads to round up thousands of Black and Latino males at the same time and search them. Even those without any substances were entered into a gang database for further surveillance (Balto and Felke-Kantor).

> ***In an environment in which the boundaries of the community were made porous by more authoritarian policing, and deindustrialization exhausted community resources, it is no wonder that the concept of sovereignty and ownership was pushed back and remapped onto the self instead of the community.***

The neoliberal shift identified by Quinn can be better understood by noting how Gangsta rap repurposed the aesthetics of Black Power. Quinn speaks of creative industry and Gangsta rap's entrepreneurial turn as "addressing vital issues of self-determination, achievement, income, and respect," but doesn't necessarily place its appeal in the context of past ideologies that captured the imagination of the Black community. Instead, she highlights a binary wherein "collective protest strategies" like Black Power were rejected in favor of "a ruthless drive for profit." However, the music of NWA shows a mutation of the Black Power ethos that could align with neoliberalism. Both NWA and Black Power articulated a sense of ownership based on a military perimeter and resistance to the police; however, Black Power grounded this concept of ownership in the community, whereas NWA grounded it in the self. NWA's concept of self-ownership, grounded in ideas shared with Black Power like resistance to the police and military mas-

culinity, could easily align with neoliberal individualism. In particular, it offered the promise of a fluid synthesis between Black Power aesthetics and a free-market neoliberal future, which might help explain the entrepreneurial turn that Quinn identifies.

In fact, in the song "Alwayz Into Somethin'," released as a single in 1991 by NWA, as part of their last wave of releases, we see exactly that. There's a focus on self-ownership, which is articulated in the Black Power discourse of resistance to police brutality. Dre describes how the individual prowess of him and Ren allows him to evade the police: "And as we roll on, I seen the patrol on creep, so we got ghost before they peeped," and throughout the song, the featured DJ Admiral Bailey repeatedly rails against the police, highlighting the indignity of being mistreated by them and implicitly calling for resistance. He repeatedly chimes, "Fuck the mothafuckin' police 'cause they see a dreadlocks down, And they kick him in his mothafuckin' balls, Goddamn police, fuck them!" (NWA, "Alwayz. . ."). The concept of self-ownership, realized through resistance against the police, coexists with a more neoliberal emphasis on accumulating and displaying wealth. The song mentions that Ren is driving around in a Mercedes-Benz, and Dr. Dre emphasizes how the Gangsta lifestyle is about receiving a steady dream of cash, rapping, "I gotta get paid / Paid in a hurry, see" and noting that he will switch to another more lucrative criminal venture if he is not making enough (NWA, "Alwayz…"). In "Alwayz into Something," we see an idea of self-ownership grounded in resistance to the police align with a neoliberal idea of wealth accumulation; it is a clear illustration of how Gangsta rap's articulation of a concept of self-ownership grounded in themes from the Black Power movement allowed for the synthesis of Black Power aesthetics and neoliberal values.

Amidst deindustrialization and the War on Crime, the vision of community ownership offered by the Black Power movement spatially narrowed to become the vision of self-ownership on the streets advanced in Gangsta rap. However, ownership always remained articulated through the same Black Power themes of resistance against the police and military masculinity. Thus, as the self-ownership of Gangsta rap increasingly mapped onto neoliberal possibilities, it offered the prospects of a synthesis between Black Power themes and free market values, easing the transition towards neoliberalism among the Black community. Historians baffled by the recent rightward shift in the United States have embraced a concept called "fusionism"—the syncretization of pre-neoliberal ideologies and systems of thought with the new free-market order (Rothfeld). Examples theorized have been the conflation of evangelical religious responsibility with economic responsibility, the natural workings of the family with the natural workings of the economy, and the neoliberal rhetoric of promoting the worthy with a new type of eugenics (Cooper; McGirr; Slobodian). By offering a sense of self-ownership infused with discourses from Black Power that can be synthesized with a free-market vision, Gangsta rap points us to a new type of fusionism that ultimately contributes to the story of how a neoliberal ethos has become hegemonic in our society.

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