

“Straight Outta Compton” and Continuity: An Interview with Shawn Syed

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The driving beats, the controversial lyrics, the ensuing “moral panic” of the 1980s and 90s, and the undeniably controversial artists are just a few reasons why Gangsta rap is such an enduring cultural phenomenon. Rising to prominence in the late 1980s, the genre defined a generation and sparked national debates about the glorification of violence versus a harsh form of social commentary on inner-city life. But what connects this new wave of individualism and ideas of self-ownership seen in Gangsta rap to the collective social movements that came just a decade before?

This was the question that Shawn Syed sought to answer. Syed, a current WashU history major from the class of 2028, has always been interested in modern American politics and culture as well as 19th-century Europe and Asia. In high school, in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, his teacher commented on “this element of Gangsta rap, about having total control of yourself and being able to fend off anything in your environment and how people should read more socially into that.” This one-off comment inspired Syed to look into the literature surrounding gangsta rap and decide to use the topic for his College Writing final project.

“I want to understand things that we traditionally think are irrational or have no social explanation,” Syed said. “I want to sort of dig into the underlying social structure...to put it in context. And one way to put it in context is continuity.”

Syed found that previous scholars have said that there’s little to no continuity between the ideas of Gangsta rap and the ideas of collective Black social movements, like the Black Power movement. However, he argued that “the focus on defining the boundaries of your community...the possessiveness of your own community, shifts to a focus on self-owner-

ship.” This shift can happen due to a variety of changes, such as the war on crime and decreased resources for urban communities. As communities fragmented, people were drawn toward individualism and self-ownership as a way to assert power, which aligned with the neoliberal political culture that was sweeping the United States at the time.

“In the Black Power movement, community ownership is connoted by defense from over-policing and this military ideal of masculinity that persists in these discourses of self-ownership,” Syed explained. “Self-ownership is also defined by those same concepts, but in this case, it can now map onto these more right-wing free market policies.” This synthesis of left-wing aesthetics from the Black Power movement with right-wing values from neoliberalism is something that scholars call “fusionism,” which is what Syed argues is the connection between the seemingly disconnected transition between collective ideologies and the individualism in Gangsta rap.

One challenge Syed faced during the research process was differentiating between ideological references and realism in NWA’s song lyrics, such as their frequent mentions of Soviet weaponry. He found that rappers at the time wouldn’t ordinarily have access to these types of firearms, which meant that they were likely referring to these weapons due to their use in revolutions, especially in South America. He was able to turn this difficulty into an example to further strengthen his argument that “this revolutionary military masculinity is a continuity between the left-wing vision of Black Power and the individualistic right-wing vision in NWA.”

“The historical field is a lot broader than people think it is,” Syed said when asked about his thoughts on his field of

study and its future trajectory. “It’s not just politics. It can be culture, religion, food, or economics...all kinds of things. And because it studies structures that both constrain and enable our possibilities today, it’s important to examine. And anytime you learn the history of something, you’ll come away with a totally different understanding...especially when considering politics today.”

Syed advised students and new researchers that “if it seems like your research is tearing open the entire edifice of everything, all the scholarship that had been done before, I would say keep doing it. Just keep doing that and be original.” Over the course of his research, he had realized that he needed to invent new concepts and new vocabulary to describe the concepts of self-ownership and the boundaries around communities, because those topics had been overlooked by academia and the examination of them in detail was novel. But working straight up from the primary elements rather than extending or building upon other research is sometimes needed, he emphasized. “We need in the humanities and the historical discipline more projects that are really willing to construct a totally different framework of things. It can be scary to invent your own interpretations of everything... but keep doing that, and just make sure it’s rigorous, and something beautiful can come out of that.”

“We’re entering a strange new era with new factors and new variables,” Syed said. It’s important to look at the past to understand the forces that shape our future. ■

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