

«American made with a Mexican Flow!« Chicano Hip-Hop in Los Angeles, 1987-2001

Chicano hip-hop was created in the late 1980s in the sphere of West Coast hip-hop, Los Angeles emerging as its epicenter. Mexican-American and Latino DJs and rappers distinctively translated their culture into music: beats were highly influenced by African-American funk and soul, as well as Chicano rock, Latin jazz and Mexican folk music. The multilingual lyrics in English, Spanish, and *Caló* dealt with gang violence, police brutality and street life in the *varrio* ('hood), expressing the artists' cultural roots and proclaiming Brown pride. The history of Chicano hip-hop must be considered in the context of the political climate of the 1980s and '90s, when Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and all the state of California faced policies of anti-immigration, racial profiling and language discrimination. The emergence and relevance of the subgenre's ethnic label 'Chicano rap' is central to the question of self-representation and categorization through the music industry, for it is being perceived by artists as both empowering and limiting. Reconstructing the rise of early commercially successful Chicano hip-hop, this project aims to explore the agency and hidden histories of Mexican American hip-hop artists that so far have been widely overlooked.

In Los Angeles, "the city dubbed the gang capital of America" (METCALF 2009), Chicano hip-hop uniquely merged with street gang culture and many of artists were gang members. The innate turf mentality and profound relationship to place is mirrored in artist names, lyrics, and beats that entail geographical identifiers, claims to neighborhoods or gangs and narratives about the *varrio*. At the same time, spaces of cultural rooting and "imagined communities" (ANDERSON 1983) such as Mexico or *Aztlán* are omnipresent. Hence, artists forge "extreme local" (FORMAN 2002) identities, while simultaneously promoting pan-Latino pride across city-, state- and country borders. In consequence, tracing the micro-history of Chicano hip-hop in Los Angeles includes regarding the "transcultural flows" (APPADURAI 1996) between Mexico and the United States. Central questions are how Mexican Americans have been able to stay connected to the music of their ancestors, how new musical forms have been created through "cultural hybridization" (CANCLINI 1995) in the Black and Brown communities of Los Angeles, and how local and transnational symbols have been recreated and maintained in West Coast and Chicano hip-hop.

This study explores the history of Chicano hip-hop through a spatial lens, focusing on cultural signifiers in audio-visual material. How are space and ethnicity being negotiated in Chicano hip-hop? How are common identities created that transcend locality and ethnicity through music? Methodologically, this interdisciplinary project brings together ethnography (qualitative interviews, participant observation), critical source evaluation (music, lyrics, and music videos) and the analysis of secondary sources (music magazines, newspapers, footage). Building upon CROSS & KELLY (1993), KELLEY (1994), PÉREZ-TORRES (2006), MCFARLAND (2008), and BAKER (2018), among others, this project aims to contribute to a new perspective on West Coast hip-hop history, highlighting the hidden histories of Mexican American agency.

KEYWORDS: Los Angeles, Chicano Rap, Mexican American, Transculturality, West Coast Hip-Hop.