
Book Review: *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America*

Felicia Angeja Viator, *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 337 pp.

In 1988, Nelson George reported what then maybe sounded like a spatial riddle: “Rap’s gone national,” he wrote, “and is in the process of going regional.”¹ Writing during one of rap’s most furiously paced periods of development, George described what he thought might be the beginnings of a swing away from New York’s rap hegemony. His case studies included pioneering Angeleno reality rapper Ice-T, whose 1987 debut, *Rhyme Pays*, had clocked 300,000 sales in just six months, and is now seen as a key early articulation of what became known as “gangsta rap.” But, for George, writing at the beginning of 1988, this wasn’t yet a consideration—he simply referred euphemistically to T’s “raps that refer to West Coast scenes.”² The speed and force of the subsequent rise of gangsta rap, however, was notable. Within a year, N.W.A.’s incendiary *Straight Outta Compton* had begun to make the emerging genre a national scare story. Within another three, Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* (1992) had successfully reinvented it as American pop, his sound becoming as globally iconic of Californian American-ness as the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds* (1966) was in its era – and this as a Black sound from below in the ambiguous racial context of a nation reeling from the Los Angeles riots.

This ambivalence is at the heart of Felicia Angeja Viator’s argument about the extraordinary rise of gangsta rap. In late 1992, former N.W.A members Dr. Dre and Ice Cube almost at once asserted their twin commercial supremacy in American pop, foregrounding unflinching—though differing—critiques of American power. The respective albums they did this with disproved the conventional wisdom that to cross over was necessarily to soften, or to present an unthreatening Black face to mainstream white mores. *The Chronic* ended 1993 at number six in *Billboard*’s annual album countdown, and Cube’s *The Predator* at number 26. Viator rightly reads this as a critical and fascinating rupture in the racial politics of American pop. It’s worth noting that the only three rap albums to have previously achieved the same prominence *The Chronic* did on *Billboard*’s annual countdown were significantly less likely to trouble the status quo, and two of them were

1. Nelson George, “Nationwide: America Raps Back,” *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bobos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 80.

2. George, “America Raps Back,” 83.

by white acts: Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* (1986), Vanilla Ice's *To the Extreme* (1990), and MC Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* (1990). Dre and Cube were "not the first hip-hop artists to defy the illusion of a post-racial America" (266). But in one of the book's most crucial passages, Viator argues that "they were the first rappers who crossed over *because* they asserted themselves as the personification of that defiance" (266).³ The resultant cultural ubiquity depended, of course, on capturing the imaginations of white teens across America, and thus enacted the metaphorical *Home Invasion* Ice-T posited on his 1993 album of the same name. Its engine, Viator suggests, was "the fact that audiences were both horrified and mesmerized" by these missives of frustration from a young, Black Los Angeles, whose discontents were decades in the making (266).

One of the strengths of Viator's analysis is her refusal of either/or thinking, as evidenced in her observation of gangsta rap audiences' simultaneous horror and awe. She is a particularly cogent writer who can crystallize the tug of contradictory pleasures and impulses that can be awakened by listening to gangsta rap. With the genre's frank and sometimes harrowing depictions of violence toward other young Black men, bawdy or violent misogyny, and, on Cube's "Black Korea" and "No Vaseline," even anti-Asian racism and anti-Semitism, some critics have overlooked the radical anti-power politics that simultaneously ran through much early gangsta rap (hear Cube affiliates Da Lench Mob's *Guerrillas in the Mist* (1992) for the sometimes troubling epitome of rap's gangsta/revolutionary trope). "Like blues artists in their time, gangsta rappers were lambasted as smut peddlers by some and exalted as truth tellers by others," Viator observes towards the end of the book, "The assumption being that peddling smut was incompatible with revealing truth" (255). It is this thornier third path that Viator makes the case for in *To Live and Defy in LA*, and does so with nuance and intellectual honesty about music's ability to be more than one thing.

The canonic moment represented by the convergence of Cube/Dre/Rodney King, however, is the endpoint of Viator's argument. What precedes it is a fascinating and complex history that the author unpicks with skill and archival subtlety. The book's approach is to entwine accounts of key musical lightning rods from the genre's development with a detailed social history of young, Black LA—one that benefits from reaching back to the city's emergence as an industrial magnet during the Great Migration, when, as Angeleno jazz musician Horace Tapscott argues, the city was seen as the "land of golden opportunity" (7). The subsequent history of race and power, however, was notoriously vexatious. As the book accounts, it is one of broken social promises, rampant abuses of power, crude perceptions of—and mistreatment of—gang-adjacent Black youth, and, increasingly by the mid-1980s, generational rifts in LA's Black communities. It is this historic brew, and the presence of social institutions such as independent record manufacturer Macola, that, Viator argues, yielded gangsta rap.

3. While, of course, Public Enemy's success was built on highlighting the enduring racism of America in the post-Civil Rights era, the group did not cross over in the way that *The Chronic* and *The Predator* did. Both albums whose success, Viator correctly suggests, redefined what was pop.

Maybe unsurprisingly, given the book makes a theme of this music's prescience, much of this social history feels depressingly pertinent in the present. We learn of the LAPD's role in militarizing police, most staggeringly via the co-option of the Vietnam-era V-100 armored vehicle into the war on drugs, but also through the use of sometimes-fatal chokeholds. No less toxic is the indiscriminate approach to policing the book evidences. Black youths on the peripheries of gang culture were policed as if they themselves were active gangbangers simply because they grew up in neighborhoods where gangs operated. The book proposes that it was most often these figures, and not those actively engaged in gangs, who made the music that fictionalized life in these communities for popular consumption. As expressions of generational rage, Viator suggests, the music issued a warning "that America incubated inequality at its own peril" (16). And there is indeed a distinctly Attalian quality to the way records by Ice Cube, N.W.A, and others, seem to prophesize 1992's Los Angeles riots, and yet continue to sound discontent in an era that has continually made Black Lives Matter necessary.

Viator warns us early on that *To Live and Defy* is not a genre history, and there remains a gap for a scholarly book that more exhaustively maps the cultural and biographical histories of gangsta rap's most influential figures. But, in choosing the increasingly popular tack of using Black music as a portal to a place in time, Viator does something perhaps more interesting: she creates a space somewhere between Mike Davis's archivally rich classic of Angeleno social history, *City of Quartz*, and the necessarily less-extended treatment Jeff Chang brings to Los Angeles rap in his landmark hip-hop history, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*. One minor criticism of Viator's excellent work is that its latter parts tend to lean more on music examples that will be already familiar subjects of analysis for well-read hip-hop fans and scholars. While this of course comes with the territory of organizing a book around inflection points, Viator breathes new life into this material with an approach to archival work that is particularly rich in historic detail. In this much, she is a rare hip-hop historian who has trawled the Los Angeles press seemingly day-by-day. Indeed, her topic is particularly conducive to this approach. In the chapters where the subjects are less well-known, like the one on Toddy Tee's 1985 pre-gangsta reality rap "Batterram," the result is a tour de force of novel material and insights, combined with convincing argumentation for why these subjects matter. *To Live and Defy in LA* is a thorough and compelling contribution to hip-hop history.

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