Book examines how gangsta rap changed America

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DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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In the early 1980s, rap music and hip hop were synonymous with New York City artists, fans, and venues.

According to one critic, the whiter, more privileged southern California “La-La Land” was not fertile ground for a street-based musical style created by Black and brown kids, raised in housing projects and exposed to drugs, violence, and crime.

Within a few years, however, “gangsta rap” became an L.A. phenomenon. Drawing on the lived experiences of Blacks in communities like South Central, Inglewood and Compton, rappers like Ice Cube and Dr. Dre became “ghetto reporters,” providing sensational details about street gangs, crack cocaine, and police brutality that refuted the myth of Los Angeles as the City of Angels.

Response to oppression

In “To Live and Defy in LA,” Felicia Angeja Viator, an assistant professor of history at San Francisco State University (and a former DJ), tells the story of the emergence of a musical genre that became “an incomparable cultural and commercial force.”

Steeped “in an ethos of self-reliance, egotism, and insubordination,” Viator argues, gangsta rap was a creative response to oppression and exploitation that engaged (and incited) people on the fringes, even as it “provoked, and elicited animus from those with the power.”

History of racism

Viator does a fine job of laying out the context for the rise of gangsta rap.

She reviews the long history of racism and violence in the Los Angeles Police Department, exemplified by Police Chief Daryl Gates’ “hunch” that African Africans suffered a disproportionate number of bar-arm chokehold deaths because their “veins or arteries do not open up as fast as they do in normal people.”
Viator reveals as well that as employment opportunities diminished with the “deindustrialization” of Los Angeles, the city contained more than 50,000 gang members, divided into hundreds of neighborhood-based organizations, and responsible for a stunning increase in murders.

**Defends gansta rap**

Not surprisingly, then, Ice Cube’s “The -Boyz-N-The Hood” verses, written in the vernacular of drugs, classic cars, and police abuse, resonated with audiences as “the authentic poetry of the street.” As did “Straight Outta Compton” and other songs and videos by NWA (Niggaz Wit Attitudes), involving “heavy rotation” of the word “f–k.”

Viator does not deny that “gangsta rap” lyrics are inflammatory. Indeed, she acknowledges that by feeding misogyny, violence, conspicuous – and illicit – consumption, rappers disseminate racist ideas about Black youth and inner-city ghettoes.

She defends gangsta rap, however, on several grounds. As he started thinking about how to dramatize the lives of boys in the ‘hood in film school, South Central native John Singleton, Viator indicates, heard NWA “giving voice to everything I had seen growing up.”

**Elevating conversation**

Viator seems to endorse author Ta-Nehisi Coates’ claim that rappers “have no responsibility to be hopeful or optimistic,” but instead “presented the world in all its brutality and beauty, not in the hopes of changing it but in the mean and selfish desire to not be enrolled in its lie.”

In a variant on this theme, Viator suggests that NWA’s music may be best understood as an expression of powerlessness, a revenge fantasy about victory when defeat is a “burning reality.”

And Viator also maintains that in making audiences uncomfortable about frequently ignored injustices, rappers helped recalibrate the national conversation about crack cocaine, mass incarceration, urban policing, and racial profiling.

**Author’s conclusion**

In the end, Viator concludes, some Americans embraced gangsta rap as long overdue truth-telling, while others blasted it as lewd, simplistic, and self-indulgent.

Either way, talented and insightful rappers tapped into “the hidden realities of urban disinvestment, racial isolation, unemployment, and militarized policing – and found ways for their product to exploit a shifting, spectacle-hungry media environment.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.