

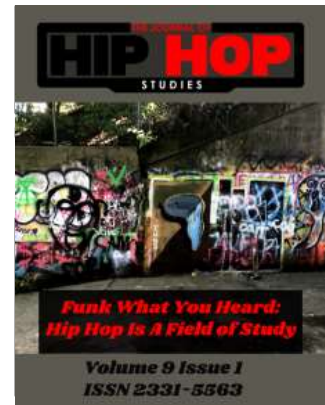
## Hustle in H-Town: Hip Hop Entrepreneurialism in Houston

Brittany L. Long

*Journal of Hip Hop Studies,*

Volume 9, Issue 1, Winter 2022, pp. 53 - 76

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/nmfe-1m93>



# Hustle in H-Town: Hip Hop Entrepreneurialism in Houston

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**Brittany L. Long**

Imagine a sprawling, overheated American megalopolis that epitomizes diversity and segregation in one of the world's youngest countries. Despite Houston's history of structural racism and segregation, Houston Hip Hop entrepreneurs built communities and created storied businesses that culminate in a sense of local pride and Hip Hop identity that has not been replicated in the same manner in any other city. An examination of thought-provoking existing scholarship about the Hip Hop South and Hip Hop in Houston, as well as an examination of existing and collected primary sources (interviews) allow me to demonstrate two things: Hip Hop entrepreneurialism is a relevant and important foundational element to understanding Hip Hop in Houston and more generally Hip Hop in the South and can contribute to the understanding of Hip Hop globally. Additionally, Houston Hip Hop entrepreneurs continue to run businesses and build communities in direct conversation with the lived experience of identifying as Hip Hop within the city itself. Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in Houston and the Hip Hop South is understudied in the academy and deserves more recognition so that scholars can emphasize the true grit of Hip Hop collectivity.

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## Introduction

For decades the global conversations around Hip Hop as a field of study have focused too heavily on rap music and lyrical analysis; for example, Hip Hop as resistance (we can hear it in the music), Hip Hop as storytelling (we can see it in music videos), and Hip Hop as an African diasporic phenomenon (we can attempt to trace its history). However, some scholars have added new elements to the conversation. Through examination of existing scholarship on Hip Hop and how it contributes to a collective identity, I build on author and Hip Hop scholar Daniel White Hodge's assertion that entrepreneurialism is one of the ten foundational elements of Hip Hop. While all or most scholarship on Hip Hop is valid in its own right, the focus has seldom been on the Hip Hop South and the Hip Hop entrepreneurialism that created markets and communities despite Jim Crow and structural racism post-slavery.

A handful of scholars of the Hip Hop South have given a decent amount of credence to, for instance, OutKast's contribution, the Hip Hop South identity, or contextualizing the Hip Hop South as the third movement or "Third Coast" *other* in Hip Hop history. The Hip Hop South rose from the peripheries of mainstream Hip Hop, sitting outside of and other to the East/West Coast Hip Hop powerhouses of the 1980s and 1990s. Southern Hip Hoppas were able to circumvent traditional structures and find success outside of mainstream Hip Hop markets despite sociocultural configurations in place preventing entrepreneurs from taking advantage of big-name labels and big-name markets. I contend that the "alienation trope" that Regina N. Bradley refers to in her studies is an understudied element of the Hip Hop South. Southern Hip Hoppas found creativity and community operating outside of the structural boundaries of the norm and what was preconceived as marketable by record label executives. I aim to scratch the

surface in underscoring the Hip Hop entrepreneurial voices of Houston whose perseverance and creativity contributed to the rise of successful Hip Hop businesses in the South and globally. I aim to emphasize the independence, self-reliance, and adaptability of Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the Hip Hop South, and mainly, Hip Hop Houston.

Notably, there is not a complete lack of academic scholarship studying the rise of Hip Hop in Houston. Historian Tyina Steptoe paid historical attention to the rise of Black entrepreneurship through cultural exchange and the merging of Black identities pre- and post-Jim Crow in the city.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars contributing to the Hip Hop Houston conversation have paid critical attention to the ways in which the city of Houston experienced the desecration and bisection of Black communities despite the historical existence of Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurialism in said communities.<sup>2</sup> Scholars who have contributed to the Hip Hop South conversation point out that the experience of being Black in the South directly relates to why and how Hip Hop rose in various southern cities, understanding that Hip Hop is created in opposition to mainstream Hip Hop success. Houston Hip Hop scholars have successfully accounted for the ways in which Hip Hoppas created space and place for Black and Brown youth to feel seen, heard, and able to participate in authentic communities while speaking their truth to power.<sup>3</sup> However, I postulate that examining the perspectives of Houston Hip Hoppas from an entrepreneurial perspective has the ability to contribute to the conversation of what the Hip Hop “hustle” actually entails. Through the investigation of emic perspectives on the matter, I discovered that Houston Hip Hoppas care a great deal about thriving in a way that allows them to stay authentically Houston, and everybody seems to stick around.

Hip Hoppas such as Bun B, Ricky Royal, Paul Wall, MC Wicket Crickett, Hiram Trevino, and Kidricc James, in conversations with various academics, journalists, and yours truly, have allowed me to identify several themes characterizing Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in Houston. First, Houston Hip Hoppas embraced collective identities centering on the rise of DJ Screw in the 1990s, and Screw proved to be an important icon in the community, demonstrating that success could be achieved without

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<sup>1</sup> Tyina L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Jan Lin, “Ethnic Places, Postmodernism, and Urban Change in Houston,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1995): 629–47; Matt Miller, “Dirty Decade: Rap Music and the U.S. South, 1997–2007,” *Southern Spaces*, June 10, 2008, *Southernspaces.org*; Langston Collin Wilkins, “Screwston, TX: The Impact of Space, Place, and Cultural Identity on Music Making in Houston’s Hip Hop Scene,” PhD diss., Indiana University, 2016; and Maco L. Faniel, *Hip-Hop in Houston: The Origin and the Legacy* (Charleston, SC: History, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Faniel, *Hip-Hop in Houston*; Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, and How Hip-hop Became a Southern Thing* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007); Jimmy Patiño, “‘Growin’ up in the ‘hood same as me’: Black and Brown Hip Hop Subjectivities at an H-town Record Store,” *The Journal of South Texas* 30, no. 2 (2017): 74–87.

already having money or obtaining a major record deal in the Hip Hop space. Second, Houston Hip Hoppas who capitalized on the communities consistently pumped money back into local recording studios, businesses, and even non-profits, embracing the southern sensibility of community-building, at times in spite of aspiring to national or international fame. Lastly, Hip Hoppas in Houston are tenacious. They create success on their own, adopting a self-made mentality that has boded well for Black and Brown entrepreneurs in the city for decades. The self-made entrepreneurial mentality allowed Houston Hip Hop to thrive locally until it gained national attention. Hip Hop Houston persists, proving that Houston's Hip Hop entrepreneurs deserve their true iconic place in conversations about Hip Hop and the Hip Hop South.

### Hip Hop and Hip Hop Entrepreneurialism

Hip Hop has risen within architectural areas that generate and recreate oppression.<sup>4</sup> Hip Hop “both creates and is created by a distinct social context essential to the development of identity and subjectivity.”<sup>5</sup> Hip Hop is a feeling, a collective identity. Hip Hop has many disparate and diverse dimensions of art and culture, and it is created in direct conversation with our notions of ourselves. According to Paul Connerton, social memory is grounded in social interaction; people create notions of themselves and their communities through action, ritual, and aggregate understandings of their collective predicaments.<sup>6</sup> Collective memory is also necessary for the construction of culture and identity in both the public and private arena.<sup>7</sup> Hip Hop creates and recreates communities that have reciprocal conversations with history and that community's collective memory and identity. Henri Lefebvre defines social space as both work and product of a distinct social context.<sup>8</sup> We produce and reproduce distinct social spaces for ourselves and our communities through culture. Therefore, Hip Hop collective consciousness is distinct and similar in different urban contexts; from the city to the neighborhood even right down to the streets.<sup>9</sup> Developments in Hip Hop have actively encouraged the emergence of distinct regional identities, allegiances, territorial rivalries, and closer ties to cities and even specific neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Craig L. Wilkins, “(W)rapped Space: The Architecture of Hip Hop,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 54, no. 1 (2000): 7-19.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkins, “(W)rapped Space,” 7.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Hip Hop and rap music are linked to a collective African past. Members of the African diaspora celebrate an Afrocentric life force through Hip Hop. See Wilkins, “(W)rapped Space: The Architecture of Hip Hop,” 7-19; and Miller, “Dirty Decade: Rap Music and the U.S. South, 1997-2007.”

<sup>10</sup> Murray Forman, “‘Represent’: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music,” *Popular Music* 19, no. 1 (2000): 68.

Hip Hop is founded on authenticity, which resides in one who has acquired the knowledge that permits one to perform authentically (accurately and genuinely).<sup>11</sup> Hodge claims that “Hip Hop is an urban subculture that seeks to express a lifestyle, attitude or theology. Rejecting the dominant culture, it seeks to increase social consciousness, cultural awareness and racial pride. Rap music functions as the vehicle by which the cultural messages of Hip Hop are sent, and the industry by which Hip Hop culture is funded and propagated.”<sup>12</sup> Rap is an economic engine, making some artists and corporations a lot of money and, in Hodge’s words, “Hip hop offers its adherents community and a voice [and] a safe, productive alternative to the streets.... Hip Hop transcends age, political status, socioeconomic status [and] social standings ...”<sup>13</sup> Creating an alternative sense of identity through Hip Hop in environments where opportunities lack, Hip Hoppas are, I contend, inevitably entrepreneurial.

In his book *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs, and a Cultural Theology*, Hodge builds on the four foundational elements of Hip Hop that scholars have used to define Hip Hop for decades: DJing and turntablism, breaking and breakdancing, rapping and emceeing, and graffiti.<sup>14</sup> Hodge contends that there are six additional foundational elements of Hip Hop, and they are: b-boying, break beats, street knowledge, street language, street fashion, knowledge of God and self, and entrepreneurialism.<sup>15</sup> Hodge’s explanation of entrepreneurialism as a foundational Hip Hop element is succinct. I include it below:

Hip Hop’s roots are in entrepreneurialism. The culture started as rap artists actively promoted themselves and built loyal followings. Sean Puffy Combs and Jay Z each have their own clothing label, record companies, and recording studios. The self-reliant spirit of Hip Hop is, however, developed within a supportive community.<sup>16</sup>

I postulate that most Hip Hoppas would confirm that they wouldn’t have been able to find success without invoking the support of their communities. Hip Hop entrepreneurs serve and entertain their communities in exchange for their support while representing the community through Hip Hop practice. As Hodge puts it, “Even in its early forms, Hip Hop was about community, with artists ... giving voice to a group of people that had no voice, questioning authority, recovering empty answers, and providing spiritual guidance for its members. This emphasis on empowering the powerless would carry on throughout the explosive growth Hip Hop experienced in the years to come.”<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Scholars that have highlighted the four “main elements of Hip Hop” include: Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); George Nelson, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Joseph G. Schloss, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-hop Culture in New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), among many others.

<sup>15</sup> Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 43

<sup>16</sup> Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 49.

emphasis on the element of entrepreneurialism is paramount to understanding what Hip Hop truly is.

What scholars have historically failed to focus on is that Hip Hop is bigger than Hip Hop music, is more than rap music and lyrical analysis, and that Hip Hop is an “African diasporic phenomenon that consists of multiple flows that create Hip Hop ciphars around the world.”<sup>18</sup> As Gwendolyn D. Pough puts it, “Hip Hop is a state of mind; a way of living and being that expands further than what kind of music one listens to. And there is power there, so much power, that some people are scared of it.”<sup>19</sup> As Travis T. Harris also stresses, “Dispossession, saltwater slavery, forced and voluntary migration, and being strangers in a foreign land shape a Hip Hop worldview [including] the ability to create and sustain life, persist in the midst of oppression [and] party in the middle of the fire;” All of these elements “make up the culture and Hip Hop as a way of life.”<sup>20</sup>

One might also argue that being an entrepreneur is a way of life. I posit that Hip Hop in Houston and the entrepreneurialism related to the Hip Hop South are a consequence of the African diasporic experience of the American South that Harris asserts. Additionally, the spirit of Hip Hop entrepreneurialism fuels the spirit of Hip Hop communities in Houston while contributing to the international understanding of Hip Hop and the American Hip Hop South in ways that are not fully realized in the academy.

Like Hip Hoppas globally, Houston Hip Hoppas exist in the space of African diasporic identity and collective marginalization. The ways in which they were able to create a come-up for themselves in their communities despite existing in environments not created for them to thrive is deserving of attention. Hip Hoppas embraced the inevitable collective entrepreneurialism in their communities. Hip Hop Houston entrepreneurs located in the context of the “Dirty South” contribute authentically to the discourse of the worldwide Hip Hop movement.

### **The Hip Hop South**

Scholars of the Hip Hop South such as Regina N. Bradley and Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis contend that OutKast winning “Best New Rap Group” at the 1995 Source Awards represented a pivotal moment in Hip Hop history where the Hip Hop South finally pushed past the geographic and cultural boundaries of the American South, marking its recognition in popular Hip Hop global conversation.<sup>21</sup> As Niewiadomska

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<sup>18</sup> Travis T. Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop? From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2, article 7 (2019): 7, <https://doi.org/10.34718/27nk-bx98>

<sup>19</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, “Seeds and Legacies: Tapping the Potential in Hip-Hop,” in *That’s the Joint: Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 284.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop,” 6.

<sup>21</sup> Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis, “Hip Hop and the South: Spotlight: Atlanta Hip Hop,” *The Routledge Companion to Literature of the US South* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 459–64; Regina N. Bradley, *Chronicle Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-hop South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

puts it, “southern rap [became] the third widely recognized regional genre of American hip hop.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact, Texas originally received the “Third Coast” nickname, but the term has been adopted to include the Southern Gulf Coast, and subsequently (as Hip Hop spread) the entire Southern US, thereby defining Bradley’s “Hip Hop South.”<sup>23</sup> For decades, Houston Third Coast Hip Hop entrepreneurs were unable to secure national recognition and the funding of big record labels, so they hustled the culture themselves. “Unable to secure big national labels to promote their albums in the late 1980s and early 1990s, southern [Hip Hoppas] turned to their own independent record labels (e.g., No Limit Records in New Orleans, and Hypnotize Minds in Memphis) and appeared on mixtapes.”<sup>24</sup> That being said, scholars have seldom added to the academic conversation while highlighting the multifaceted ways that entrepreneurialism in the Hip Hop South enabled the culture to understand and create opportunity in their communities *through* the Hip Hop community.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars and writers of the Hip Hop South have thus far mapped origins and place-based differences in rap music in the South. For example, Niewiadomska walks the reader through various origins of Southern Hip Hop music, such as Crunk (Memphis), Trap (Atlanta), Screwed & Chopped (Houston), Trill (Houston), party-style club Hip Hop (Miami), and Bounce (New Orleans). Speaking to the culture, Niewiadomska positions the Hip Hop South mentality:

Some southern ... hip hop groups transformed what was perceived as their weakness into success – instead of being ashamed of projected negative stereotypes of their southern identity (synonymous with backwardness, trashiness, and rural sensibilities) they adopted “country” stylings (“Belts to Match,” UGK) ... In each case of unapologetic acceptance of southern sensibilities repositions and authenticates the narratives of southern Black lives imbued with poverty, economic exclusion, and social inequality ... encapsulated in the “Dirty South” image.<sup>26</sup>

Like OutKast, Southern Hip Hop entrepreneurs needed to embrace their place outside of the mainstream, creating culture and businesses for themselves and their communities until their creations reached far and wide in the sphere of the Hip Hop global conversation.<sup>27</sup> Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the South challenge “preconceived notions of the South and celebrate southern regional distinctiveness but also remain faithful to their local identities. They have embraced their marginalization and redefined the position of southern hip hop in American culture in general.”<sup>28</sup> What often doesn’t make its way into

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<sup>22</sup> Niewiadomska, “Hip Hop and the South,” 459.

<sup>23</sup> Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, and How Hip-hop Became a Southern Thing* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2007); Bradley, *Chronicling Stankonia*.

<sup>24</sup> Niewiadomska, “Hip Hop and the South,” 459.

<sup>25</sup> Niewiadomska, “Hip Hop and the South,” 461.

<sup>26</sup> Niewiadomska, “Hip Hop and the South,” 461.

<sup>27</sup> Bradley, *Chronicling Stankonia*; and Niewiadomska, “Hip Hop and the South.”

<sup>28</sup> Niewiadomska, “Hip Hop and the South,” 464.

the conversation are the origin stories of the label, the artist, and the material elements and sociocultural realities of Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in southern cities.

Bradley contends that OutKast's use of "alienation as a Hip Hop trope [in their music] makes room to renegotiate contemporary southern Blackness as a complex space otherwise oversimplified in sociocultural discussions.<sup>29</sup> I agree, but I would like to shift the conversation because Hip Hop academics have not focused enough on Hip Hop entrepreneurialism as a "trope" or "Category" that embraced alienation as much as what has already been written about specific to rap music (lyrics, music videos, etc.). Because of the experiences of Hip Hoppas (like OutKast and other Southern rappers), alienation is often assumed, which leads to the desire to build something entirely from the ground up, something original, and something worthy of remembrance tied to the places that made them the entrepreneurs that they are. Hip Hoppas understand that the South is a site of "working cultural memory,"<sup>30</sup> situating the very forms of the business savvy they developed in being both work and product of the very communities that culminated in their sense of entrepreneurialism.

While there has been a decent amount of Hip Hop scholars paying credence to the ways in which visual and lyrical representations pay homage to southern culture,<sup>31</sup> how do the businesses, through the lens of the Hip Hoppa, also contribute to and challenge preconceived notions of the Hip Hop South? There is a lack of academic scrutiny and scholarship of the Hip Hop South through understanding various forms of grit and entrepreneurialism, one of the ten foundations of Hip Hop culture shaping the global Hip Hop conversation. What I suggest is that we can build understanding around the Hip Hop South and Hip Hop globally by studying the emic perspectives and collective identities relating to entrepreneurialism because of communities and identities tied to the Hip Hop South.

### Hip Hop Houston

Understanding the agency of Houston's Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the milieu of systemic and systematic racism is essential to understanding Hip Hop Houston. Just like Hip Hop coming out of New York City in the 1970s Bronx, the Hip Hop coming out of Houston, by and large created by Black people, gave birth to a new genre, tying together the locality, the sounds, the South, and the post-Jim Crow realities that simply weren't present in other Hip Hop "birthplaces." The rise of Black music and subsequent

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<sup>29</sup> Regina N. Bradley, ed., *An OutKast Reader: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Postmodern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Bradley, *An OutKast Reader*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Other examples of Hip Hop academics highlighting the importance of rap and how rap music contributes to southern Hip Hop cultural meccas include: Ben Westoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-Hop* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011); and Corey Miles, "Black Rural Feminist Trap: Stylized and Gendered Performativity in Trap Music," *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 44-70, <https://doi.org/10.34718/kx7h-0515>



community-building is paramount in understanding the Hip Hop culture that would form there. Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in Houston has historically been both the work and product of Blackness, Black empowerment and Black identity distinctive to the Dirty South.

For example, Black entrepreneurship has been a characteristic of Fifth Ward in Houston since the 1920s. In the 1920s, Black Houstonians, including migrants and Creoles of color, built a thriving community that has continued to expand since World War I.<sup>32</sup> By 1925, “over 40 African American owned businesses lined Lyons Avenue, the main artery of the black neighborhood on the north side.”<sup>33</sup> Fifth Ward has been a mecca for Black entrepreneurship in Houston for a century. While not many Black Americans live there today, during the Jim Crow era, “African Americans in Houston championed the maintenance and protection of black communities as an issue of racial pride, and they used neighborhoods like Fifth Ward as buffers against White supremacy.”<sup>34</sup>

Examples of Black (African diasporic) entrepreneurialism permeate Houston’s history. For example, Club Matinee, which opened in 1936, became known as “the Cotton Club of the South” and was a focal point for Black businesses, Black entertainment, and Black entrepreneurship in the 1950s.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, Don Robey, who opened the Bronze Peacock Dinner Club in the 1940s, Duke Peacock records, and Gold Star Studios in the Third Ward in the 1950s, was a well-known Black entrepreneur and had a reputation for ruthlessness. Robey evidenced that the place-based strategies of Black Houstonian entrepreneurship rooted in cultural movement have been consistent for a century, if not longer. As Hip Hop has roots in entrepreneurialism, Hip Hop Houston has roots in the Black businesses that existed in Houston before Hip Hop had a name.

Fast forward to the 1990s, entrepreneurs such as DJ Screw (founder of Screwed Up Records), Michael Watts, and OG Ron C (founders of Swishahouse) continuously established Black businesses in the same historically Black neighborhoods, pushing past and often defying legality in their culture creation while creating thriving businesses despite the difficult realities of systemic and systematic racism in the South.

The roots of Chopped and Screwed were conveyed in Hip Hop but Chopped and Screwed and the entrepreneurialism and influence of DJ Screw and Swishahouse were born in Houston *because* of Houston. For the last century, culture creation stemming from the Black experience in Houston has served as an agent of rejection of White norms and White supremacy. Members of Black communities have historically taken action and claimed their agency when faced with oppression. In Houston, this action is best shown through the emergence of “place entrepreneurs” who are “ethnic actors” that have been

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<sup>32</sup> Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> Steptoe, *Houston Bound*, 192.

able to demonstrate resilience and counter elite interests to serve their interests and the interests of their communities. Houston Hip Hop is and has historically been a creative and adaptive space filled with place entrepreneurs.

The role of systemic and systematic racism in urban planning in Houston directly relates to the rise of Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in the city. The band of Black neighborhoods in the Third, Fourth and Fifth wards that surrounded the central business district were prejudicially deemed “undesirable,” which had devastating consequences on these communities through processes of redlining, clearance, and lack of funding for public infrastructure.<sup>36</sup> Houston’s oldest Black neighborhoods faced redevelopment and demolition despite their efforts to collectively preserve their districts. After the Fourth Ward’s neighborhood residential and cultural vitality was mitigated by the Gulf Freeway, “the center of African American economic and cultural life shifted to the Fifth Ward and the Third Ward.”<sup>37</sup>

The White, mainstream perception of Black spaces in the city contributed to the justification of urban neglect. Houston is thought of as part of the “Dirty South” by mainstream culture or as the Southern *other*.<sup>38</sup> If urban planners are actively destroying and/or restricting the emergence of place-based resources in Black neighborhoods such as grocery stores, banks, affordable dining, gas stations, goods, and services, it becomes very clear that the emergence of place entrepreneurs becomes necessary and inevitable, and occurred in Houstonian communities in need of capitalistic ventures without any external aide.

Thus far I’ve provided evidence of the necessary birth of Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in Houston. The “Hood” became a form of resistance in post-Jim Crow Houston. Hip Hop practice in Houston, like Hip Hop everywhere, stands in opposition to White supremacy, and therefore, mainstream society. “Segments of black youth, men, and women use public and private settings within their ‘hoods to enact their collective social life, thus creating a space called the streets.”<sup>39</sup> Within the streets, Black youth grow up with an oppositional set of attitudes and an oppositional set of practices. Black Americans growing up in “the streets” had to “hustle.” Black Houstonians growing up in the streets created businesses, creative spaces, and Black culture as a means of a come-up and to form an empowered collective consciousness and resistance.

Regardless of having experienced desecration, destruction, and lacking governmental funding pre- and post-Jim Crow, Black Houstonians sought to control the narrative and create what Lefebvre calls “differential space”<sup>40</sup>: An oppositional space, a

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<sup>36</sup> Lin, “*Ethnic Places*,” 633.

<sup>37</sup> Lin, “*Ethnic Places*,” 640.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, “*Dirty Decade*.”

<sup>39</sup> Wilkins, “*Screwston, TX*,” 45.

<sup>40</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 47–63 and 268–90.

rejection of the material realities that were forced upon them in favor of the symbolic and tangible values that reflect and uplift agency in speaking truth to power through music-making and culture creation, while capitalizing on all of it.

Credence must be paid to scholars that have written in depth about the Hip Hop businesses in Houston. For example, Maco Faniel names Soundwaves Record Store as one of the founding Hip Hop businesses in the 1980s in his groundbreaking book *Hip Hop in Houston*, and scholar Jimmy Patiño explores the ways in which Mexican and Black identities were shaped by the presence of the record store in the early 2000s.<sup>41</sup> In understanding the importance of Hip Hop as an African Diasporic phenomenon without explicitly stating it, Patiño describes how the record store served as “a meeting space that both brought hip hop to Houston from major centers like New York but also [enabled the] local community formations of artists and consumers in local neighborhoods throughout Houston.”<sup>42</sup> Patiño proposed that the site provided an opportunity for academics to analyze ways in which Hip Hop manifested itself at the street level, paying particularly close attention to how Hip Hop consumers, particularly Latina/o and Black community members, identified as rap enthusiasts who had a shared experience of “the ‘hood’.”<sup>43</sup> However, Patiño’s article is limited in scope, focusing on consumer culture and not necessarily on Hip Hop entrepreneurialism and the founding of the store.

I agree with previous scholars like Patiño and Faniel that the role of the businesses themselves and the consumer culture that surround them are equally important in understanding what Hip Hop Houston truly was, and, subsequently, what Hip Hop truly is. However, I want to bring forward the entrepreneur perspective of Hip Hoppas in Houston under closer academic scrutiny so that a greater understanding is built around what Hip Hop collectivity includes, where we’ve been and where we’re heading.

### **In Their Words: Hip Hop Houston Entrepreneurialism**

As Hip Hop Historian Lance Scott Walker puts it, “Houston’s superstars had a lot of help building their communities, and some of the lesser-known characters have big stories they’ve just never been asked to tell. ... Mainstream attention may come and go, but the neighborhoods keep on living and breathing, and everybody sticks around.”<sup>44</sup> Hip Hoppas in Houston throughout the generations have embraced a Hip Hop South “all-from-scratch” mentality, making Hip Hoppas inherently entrepreneurial. But don’t

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<sup>41</sup> Maco L. Faniel, *Hip-Hop in Houston: The Origin and the Legacy* (Charleston SC: History Press, 2013); Jimmy Patiño, “‘Growin’ up in the ‘hood same as me’: Black and Brown Hip Hop Subjectivities at an H-town Record Store,” *The Journal of South Texas* 30, no. 2 (2017): 74–87.

<sup>42</sup> Patiño, “‘Growin’ up in the ‘hood same as me,’” 74.

<sup>43</sup> Patiño, “‘Growin’ up in the ‘hood same as me,’” 75.

<sup>44</sup> Lance Scott Walker, *Houston Rap Tapes: An Oral History of Bayou City Hip-hop* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), x.

just take it from me. Take it from Hip Hoppas that have something to say about their own rise.

By the mid-nineties, DJ Screw released homemade mix tapes, which turned gangster rap “into something trippier,” commanding a genre called Screwed & Chopped.<sup>45</sup> Screwed & Chopped was created to mimic the feeling of drinking codeine-laced cough syrup, the prescription drug intended for patients with lung cancer.<sup>46</sup> Houstonians followed DJ Screw’s lead and started to slow down “the beats of a familiar track until they’re thunderclaps and the vocals until they’re the rumble of a brontosaurus herd. Its woozy, sedated sound is the perfect backdrop for slowly cruising around a sprawling, overheated city.”<sup>47</sup> By the year 2005, Houston and the musical styling of DJ Screw gained national recognition. Screw’s contribution, via rap music, gave Houstonians a style that they could capitalize on, and everyone in the city who followed Hip Hop understood.

DJ Screw, who passed away on November 16, 2000, was certainly not the first to stylize Hip Hop music coming out of Houston. His predecessors included Geto Boys, KRino, Ricardo Royal, K9, Willie D, and many others. However, DJ Screw invented a genre and laid the groundwork for some of Houston’s most prominent rappers to become successful entrepreneurs.<sup>48</sup> Coming out of South Park, DJ Screw created a Hip Hop space in his own place, his neighborhood, where the Screwed-Up Click conducted business. Conversely, Swishahouse Records, which was founded on the North side, rounded up the talent on that side of town. Remarkably, the death of DJ Screw played a prominent role in unifying Hip Hop entrepreneurs in Houston.<sup>49</sup>

Hip Hop entrepreneurialism would remain Houston-centric as many artists donated money back into local studios and played on each other’s records instead of leaving and pursuing capitalistic ventures with major record labels prominent in New York and LA. According to Bernard James Freeman (AKA Bun B, former member of the prominent rap duo UGK, guest lecturer at Rice University, and one of Houston’s most prominent Black entrepreneurs), “[DJ Screw] could have [made] a lot more money off the tapes, he could have been more famous, but it wasn’t about him, it’s about the city ... it’s about the ‘hood and the people we represent ... that’s why we hold him in such high regard.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Gavin Edwards and Jack Thompson, “How Houston Got Screwed,” *Rolling Stone*, August 25, 2005, 73–77.

<sup>46</sup> Edwards and Thompson, “How Houston Got Screwed,” 2.

<sup>47</sup> Edwards and Thompson, “How Houston Got Screwed,” 2.

<sup>48</sup> Faniel, *Hip Hop in Houston*.

<sup>49</sup> Faniel, *Hip Hop in Houston*.

<sup>50</sup> *Screwed in Houston*, dir. Trace Crutchfield, prod. VBS IPTV, perf. Bun B, Dope E, KRino, *Music World - Vice*, Oct. 26, 2011.

Having been able to talk to MC Wickett Cricket (real name Darrell Veal), historian Lance Scott Walker gained insightful firsthand knowledge from one of Houston's first Hip Hop artists and repertoire. Having given DJ Screw his first gig (along with many other Houston rappers and artists, booking shows and weekly nightclub gigs throughout the city until his death in 2015), Veal was "there for every movement in Houston hip-hop."<sup>51</sup> Veal provided Walker with primary source evidence proving that the business of Hip Hop and the creativity that Hip Hoppas needed to keep their businesses and Hip Hop communities thriving is apparent. Since rap was new in the '80s and '90s to the city, young talent didn't have access to studios, so many Hip Hop entrepreneurs created studio spaces right in their houses and even threw concerts in their backyards. In discussions about South Park Rapper Robert Harlan, Veal points out that "they had a studio at his house ... they [threw] a big concert ... at the studio they had in his house ... During that time Rap-A-Lot was [also] doing stuff."<sup>52</sup> So, even though some studios sprang up in the city, entrepreneurs continued to push boundaries and create Hip Hop spaces of business in private homes and even in public places. At times Hip Hoppas were forced to shift locations to keep the culture alive, underscoring the tenacity of the Hip Hop entrepreneur at the time. Veal sheds light on some of the struggles they faced to keep the culture and the businesses thriving. For example, the forceful hand of the authorities ensured that his Hip Hop collective needed to be scrappy and adaptable to keep the party going. "We was goin' to MacGregor Park on Sundays [to throw concerts.] But then after the law start trippin', they took it all the way to the Northside ... to Deussen Park on Sundays."<sup>53</sup> Veal and other Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the city continue to prove that Hip Hop is adaptable, creative, and boundary-pushing and the entrepreneurial mentality engrained in Hip Hoppas allows the movement to persist.

While DJ Screw may have given Houston its own nationally recognized Hip Hop identity that was embraced by Houston Hip Hoppas to (re)create a sense of unity, according to Trace Crutchfield (once a journalist and producer for VBS IPTV) there has been a huge tradition in Houston of pumping most earnings back into the local recording studio with many of the rappers being extremely prolific locally and often on one another's records. This is due in large part to the pioneering practices of DJ Screw and the Screwed-Up Click. The South Park coalition would follow suit and maintain this tradition.<sup>54</sup> For many, DJ Screw paved the way for Houston Hip Hop entrepreneurs to make a significant living within the neighborhoods that had been systematically oppressed without having to fit into and create work and success within the mainstream, White-dominated culture.

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<sup>51</sup> Darrell Veal (AKA MC Wickett Crickett), "MC Wickett Crickett," personal interview by Lance Scott Walker, in *Houston Rap Tapes: An Oral History of Bayou City Hip-hop*, 2-12 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Veal, "Mc Wickett Crickett," 9.

<sup>53</sup> Veal, "Mc Wickett Crickett," 9.

<sup>54</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.

What other elements allowed the business of Hip Hop to flourish in Houston? Ricky Royal, one of the rappers in the emblematic Rap-A-Lot Records group Royal Flush, which helped put Houston on the proverbial “map,” sheds light on how it all started. For him, battle rap defined the emergence of Hip Hop in Houston: “If you wanted to be a rapper in Houston, you wanted to be known, you had to battle. We came up the hard way ... if you wanted to be a rapper you had to come to Rhinestone Wrangler, and before that Flashes ... the battle rapping that we did on those stages made people want to start a record company ... it went from us competing to the way you would get known in Houston.”<sup>55</sup> I contend that the recognition of the battle rap as a founding element of Hip Hop Houston speaks to the nature of Hip Hop existing as a mindset in the city and a mindset globally; a gritty, powerful tool that also brings together a collectivity with similar struggles and life experiences in the name of the movement, self-reliance, and entrepreneurial obstinacy.

What was happening in Houston Hip Hop gained widespread *local* recognition before it ever became nationally commodified, and the battle rap was of paramount importance regarding how the scene spread. Artists such as K-Rino and Houston Hip Hop pioneer DJ Steve Fournier question why scholars like Nelson George (a prominent author and Hip Hop scholar) neglected this cornerstone of Houston Hip Hop in their writings. According to DJ Steve Fournier, during a panel discussion at *A Screwed-Up History* conference, hosted by the University of Houston,

Nelson George comes down to do interviews with me, goes away, and writes [his] article and my name ain't mentioned nowhere ... now, the way I feel in New York and LA, they are looking for marketable people ... but then they exploit them and make music and say 'go do your little rap thing, make 2 or 3 million' ... there needs to be a club in Houston that does that ... they need to have people go through the whole process again and realize what [it was] really about ... people would miss work the next day to see these guys do this.<sup>56</sup>

Fournier actively defended his city by recognizing its neglected acknowledgment in the national Hip Hop discussion. Until Maco Faniel provided an extensive story on the battle rap phenomena coming out of Houston, scholars of Hip Hop had not given due credit to the city. The “battle rap” in famous clubs such as Fournier’s Rhinestone Wrangler and Flashes in the mid-1980s and 1990s are exemplary of iconic public places in which Houston Hip Hop was prominently recognized and enjoyed locally prior to national commodification. The battle raps that took place at the Rhinestone Wrangler and Flashes were public displays of what *defined* Houston Hip Hop for so many involved in the culture, pitting Hip Hop entrepreneurs against one another to win money and notoriety. Hip Hop entrepreneurs who were Emcees needed to embrace the battle rap distinctive to

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<sup>55</sup> Ricky Royal made this statement in a panel discussion, “The Origins of Houston Hip Hop,” mod. Maco L. Faniel, *A Screwed Up History: Panels and Presentations on DJ Screw and The History of Houston Hip Hop*, conference March 27–28, 2012, University of Houston.

<sup>56</sup> Steve Fournier mentioned in panel discussion, “The Origins of Hip Hop,” mod. Maco L. Faniel, at *A Screwed-Up History*, 2012.

the city to become locally successful and respected, once again proving that grit defined the mentality of the Hip Hop entrepreneur in the city.

The exclusivity of Houston's battle rap culture made it private and distinct. According to artist Willie D, a Houston native, "in the beginning people would come up to my door and ask to battle ... it was a fight culture in my neighborhood."<sup>57</sup> In addition, Trace Crutchfield, who was invited to a "thug barbeque" in Houston's Third Ward while filming VICE's documentary *Screwed In Houston* recalls "a lot of people know about Hip Hop in Houston because of people like Paul Wall and Mike Jones, but it's in places like this backyard where it all began."<sup>58</sup> Crutchfield met up with one individual, a rapper by the name of Kyu Boi, who introduced him to the entire South Park Coalition and other rapper coalitions based in Third Ward. His piece alluded to the power and the sociality of a locally based Hip Hop movement, exemplifying that Hip Hop businesses in Houston arose in privatized spaces and places within the communities of significance and meaning to the Houston-centric Hip Hop movement.

The privatized production of the music itself speaks volumes. According to Crutchfield, "These guys [Houston rappers] operated outside of the major record label system ... so they make more money selling it out of the back of their cars, on the streets, hustling it themselves, then they would ever make if they signed a deal ... it was rumored that DJ Screw sold 50,000 copies of a single mix!"<sup>59</sup> Their stories elevate the persistence and self-sufficiency of Hip Hop Houston, the Hip Hop South, and Hip Hop around the globe.

Operating outside of the major record label system was certainly not always by choice. According to Bun B, major record labels are consistently business-first, looking for marketable rappers and artists.<sup>60</sup> He notes the difficulty that Houston emcees faced from the beginning. "They took all of the fun out of this shit for us ... all the 'makin a record, going somewhere, getting a deal, you know ... we did that shit we tried that shit for years, got turned down again and again, doors slammed in your face."<sup>61</sup> However, he goes on to say that in the newly formed Houston Hip Hop arena at the time "none of these guys ever *thought* they'd get a major recording deal ... these cats learned to make what they needed to make it happen outside of the system."<sup>62</sup> Bun B and Crutchfield nail that talented Hip Hop entrepreneurs in Houston tended to rise, rather than succumb to failure, in the face of structural racism, urban neglect, and marginalization while

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<sup>57</sup> *A Screwed Up History: Panels and Presentations on DJ Screw and The History of Houston Hip Hop*, conference March 27–28, 2012, University of Houston.

<sup>58</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.

<sup>59</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.

<sup>60</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.

<sup>61</sup> Bun B, as interviewed in Crutchfield's *Screwed in Houston*.

<sup>62</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.

operating outside of the Hip Hop record label and established businesses to form something authentically their own.

James Prince, the founder of Rap-A-Lot records in 1986, exemplified Hip Hop entrepreneurial resilience. Watching his mother struggle to raise his family in the context of the dark realities of Fifth Ward inspired him to become an entrepreneur and create his own business.<sup>63</sup> For a long time, Rap-A-Lot wasn't able to produce a distribution deal because of the hard-core street elements of Houston Hip Hop. The label would come to independently distribute records like Geto Boys' *Makin Trouble*; songs that were stylistically similar to popular tracks coming out of New York at the time but were emblematic of the group's fearlessness to publicly display the space and lawlessness of the Fifth Ward.<sup>64</sup> Records coming from Rap-A-Lot would then inspire a collective consciousness that all former gangsters-turned-rappers would recognize; Hip Hop entrepreneurs in Houston began to collectively "put on" for the city and promote their home front.

In a separate interview, Ricky Royal also describes his stark come-up on the scene. Royal started hustling as early as age 11. "I used to serve fiends in my daddy's trap. My daddy and my step mama had a trap ... the fiends would come to the crib ... I served 'em. So, I would get twenty dollars off every \$100."<sup>65</sup> Ricky highlights a bleaker side to the Hip Hop entrepreneurial experience: operating outside of the confines of the law to put bread on the table. In high school, Royal joined a collectivity that was "really a gang that had rappers in it ... if you knew us, you was just part of Royal Flush. That's how we started off."<sup>66</sup> Royal Flush is exemplary in Hip Hop entrepreneurialism: the original members came together through community practices existing outside of the legal system, then created a business based on raw talent and business savvy.

Bun B also reminisces: "Gangs roll in numbers, so that's what we did ... initially we are selling Houston, but now we got to come together as a collective and say we *are* Houston ... we may not like each other but we got to put the bullshit aside and stand up for the city."<sup>67</sup> The methods that Hip Hop entrepreneurs have used have been nothing but intentional, thus promoting their labels, their city, and claiming their Hip Hop space in the greater milieu of Hip Hop globally. Sentiments expressed by prominent Texas rappers such as Bun B, Paul Wall, and Mike Jones are contiguous with Houston's Hip Hop story. According to Paul Wall, "Artists who weren't on Rap-A-Lot sold music out of their car trunks ... out of their houses. There were three radio stations that had begun

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<sup>63</sup> Faniel, *Hip-Hop in Houston*, 103.

<sup>64</sup> Faniel, *Hip-Hop in Houston*, 113.

<sup>65</sup> Ricardo Royal, (AKA Ricky Royal), "Ricky Royal," personal interview by Lance Scott Walker, in Lance Scott Walker, *Houston Rap Tapes: An Oral History of Bayou City Hip-hop* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 59.

<sup>66</sup> Royal, "Ricky Royal," 62.

<sup>67</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.



airing Hip Hop [in the early 1990s] but hardly any of the music was local.”<sup>68</sup> The come-up wasn’t easy, but what founding Hip Hoppas created in Houston was nothing short of exceptional.

Right around 1992, Houston was just recovering from the oil bust; the economic future of the city looked promising, and high-investment areas such as the Galleria began to look glamorous. However, at the same time, the new crack epidemic gripped lower-income neighborhoods. Adrian Lee echoes the circumstances of the time: “It was against this backdrop that Houston’s [Hip Hop] scene had started to form ... Rap-A-Lot Records, run by a savvy and tenacious businessman named James Prince, who defied the stereotypes of Texas music by promoting groups like the Geto Boys, whose raw lyrics provoked controversy and whose album art included a real photo of one member just after his eye had been shot out.”<sup>69</sup> Structural mistreatment and resulting violence within communities continue to have a cyclical conversation with Houston Hip Hop, once again proving that pain and suffering can result in the most empowering movements beyond empirical measure. Hip Hop Houston and the Hip Hop South are innately controversial, and early Hip Hoppas thrived in the spaces of controversy and self-sufficiency before becoming mainstream culture creators themselves.

Additionally, based on what Hip Hoppas from Houston have observed and articulated, the influence of Hip Hop Houston on material culture (and therefore, business) has been understated in America and globally. Accessories such as gold chains and S.L.A.B.S (“slow-loud-and-banging,” tricked-out big body cars) as we know them today were prominent in Houston, according to the Hip Hoppas themselves, before the trend was picked up in many other cities. According to Baldhead, owner of Baldhead Entertainment, a Hip Hop coalition in Houston, “we’ve been doing our thing, we’ve been rockin’ our big chains, we’ve been riding slabs ... half of the style that’s out right now comes from Houston, other cats emulating our style, using our words, and runnin’ with it.”<sup>70</sup> Baldhead emphasizes that the Hip Hop entrepreneurs of the city have been influential both locally and nationally for decades, again (re)writing Houston Hip Hop as something appropriated and emulated by others in the Hip Hop game, influencing the style and material culture used by Hip Hop entrepreneurs globally.

Prominent Hip Hop scholar and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* Travis T. Harris interviewed Kidricc James, Houston-based rapper and emcee who has been “in the game” for more than a decade and has collaborated with big-name artists such as Big K.R.I.T., Ludacris, Bun B, and Pusha T. James reiterates what it was like to be an emcee and entrepreneur when Houston wasn’t even on the proverbial “map”:

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<sup>68</sup> Adiran Lee, “The King of New York – or L.A. or Houston,” *Macleans* 127, no. 24, June 23, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, “The King of New York,” 22.

<sup>70</sup> Crutchfield, *Screwed in Houston*.

We had no choice. We didn't have the resources an LA or NY person would have, but we had mom-and-pop stores so we utilized that. We also went out to areas that had no access to music and capitalized on that ... We went out and created fan bases in places that were being ignored and they became faithful followers because of the fact that we reached out to them when nobody else would. I can remember a time when I would literally load up my trunk with boxes of CDs and sell them and come home with enough money to pay my bills for the month in a matter of a few hours.<sup>71</sup>

Kidricc echoes his predecessors. From the founder of Duke Peacock Records Don Robey to DJ Screw and UGK, Hip Hop Houston entrepreneurs consistently reiterate that in order to achieve success in Hip Hop they needed to create financial success for themselves by engaging those who identify with Hip Hop in Houston first.

I had another conversation with Hiram Trevino, a working DJ, producer, and educator in Houston. Before social media became a dominant force of culture creation and the Hip Hop community it is today, Trevino came up by going to Houston parties and began his career by building relationships with other artists, producers, and DJs (all of whom are Hip Hop entrepreneurs themselves) in the Houston area. Hiram DJ'd at local establishments such as Boondocks and Etro Lounge. While music-making and Hip Hop spaces in Houston are truly eclectic today, Trevino is poignant to mention that credence to Houston Hip Hop and their heyday will forever be a part of collective Hip Hop Houston pride:

There are a handful of songs that I think are classics in Houston. You know, Southside [Lil' Keke ft. AL-D, D.J. Screw, and 3-2], Tops Draw by Fat Pat ... and then there's Bun B's 'Internationals Player Anthem' ... classics like those are the ones that people hear internationally and they sample it and they remix it. So more of the classic Houston Hip Hop is not really in the same lane with the music we always play [now] *unless we choose to take them there* ... I think what's happening right now in Houston ... the club music is really taking off.<sup>72</sup>

While Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the city are not limited to place-based entrepreneurialism alone in the fully digital age, Hip Hop entrepreneurs have adapted in the city. As Trevino states, "No one is still ... poppin' trunks and selling tapes. It's such a different time. There's not a lot of that cold, nitty gritty, old-school style still happening ... [although] I do think a lot of people are still into the whole Screw style."<sup>73</sup>

The iconic Screw-based Hip Hop culture is still being capitalized on by Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the city. Trevino mentioned The Choppaholix as well-known in the area for keeping Screwed & Chopped alive. "The Choppaholix get hit up by bigger artists to make a chop-not-slop version of songs. That's what they call their remixes."<sup>74</sup> Likewise, OG Ron C, one of the founders of Swishahouse Records, still runs ChopNotSlop Radio,

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<sup>71</sup> Kidricc James, personal interview conducted by Travis T. Harris, October 10, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Hiram Trevino, personal interview conducted by Brittany Long, July 7, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Trevino, personal interview.

<sup>74</sup> Trevino, personal interview.

available online.<sup>75</sup> Ron C helped jump-start the careers of Chamillionaire, Paul Wall, and Mike Jones and is *now* the self-proclaimed Drake's #1 Chop DJ and has even released "Chop Not Slop" versions of Drake's albums, such as *Certified Lover Boy* and *Views*.

However, similar to what Bun B suggested when Houston-centric Hip Hop culture was thriving locally in the nineties and aughts before gaining national attention, Trevino suggests that there may be a grittier side to holding true to Houston Hip Hop style today. "Z-Ro and Trae the Truth [are] Houston, still doing that style. But they're not pop stars. So, it's almost like Houston style held them back."<sup>76</sup> The subject is open for debate: does staying true to what the nation would come to recognize as stylistically Houston Hip Hop in rap music keep talented Hip Hop entrepreneurs and business owners from being accepted in the mainstream lane today?

While staying authentic to classic Hip Hop culture in Houston *may* still keep regionally recognized artists from being marketable in the mainstream consciousness, an undeniable distinct kind of collective unity arose during the height of Houston Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in the city. Southern artists existed in opposition to and outside of the East Coast/West Coast Hip Hop mainstream and demonstrated a more united front in "putting on" for their cities.<sup>77</sup> However, this unity in Houston did not happen without trial. Trevino echoed what other Hip Hoppas from the city have been expressing for decades, "The two groups that came to the forefront were Swishahouse and Screwed Up Click ... there *was* a rivalry going on."<sup>78</sup> Kidricc James was already doing his thing during the rivalry between Screwed Up Click and Swishahouse. "I can honestly say that the unity in the 'hood, as well as the Hip Hop community, was something that was dope *before* the Civil War [the label rivalry that resulted in violence between affiliates of Screwed Up Click and Swishahouse]. It got really bad for a while, but we got past it, and we are *one* Houston now."<sup>79</sup> As Hip Hop's roots are in entrepreneurialism, thus comes capitalism and competition. Likewise, as Hip Hop's roots come from collective experiences stemming from violence caused by racism, violence historically makes its way into Hip Hop entrepreneurs' collective stories.

Hip Hop businesses that started from the ground up still prosper to this day in the city. For example, world-renowned Screwed Up Records remains standing and thriving. Trevino confirms, "Screwed Up Records is one place where whenever I book someone from out of town, artists, producers from like the Netherlands and Europe ... they come here and that's one of the places they want to see. If they don't want to see it, then that's one of the places I take them anyway ... I love taking them to the shop."<sup>80</sup> James also

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<sup>75</sup> *ChopNotSlop Radio*, chopnotslop.com, <https://chopnotslop.com/shows/chopnotslop-radio/>

<sup>76</sup> Trevino, personal interview.

<sup>77</sup> Bradley, *Chronicling Stankonia*.

<sup>78</sup> Trevino, personal interview.

<sup>79</sup> James, personal interview.

<sup>80</sup> Trevino, personal interview.

confirms, “As long as [Screwed Up Record’s] doors are open, people will always come because that is a part of the culture. The kids don’t necessarily tune in with that because I mean ... you can’t listen to Screw on Molly. The times have definitely changed, but The Screw Shop is definitely still alive and thriving.”<sup>81</sup> While both Trevino and James organically agreed in separate conversations that the culture has changed on the ground, what can be confirmed is that Hip Hop businesses spearheaded by known entrepreneurs are alive and are continually evolving for and within the city today.

To this day, Bun B continues to represent and capitalize on his legendary identity as one of Houston’s biggest Hip Hop entrepreneurs and culture creators. In 2022 Bun B launched Trill Burgers, which competed in Good Morning America’s Best Smash Burger competition and won.<sup>82</sup> The branding itself speaks to how Hip Hop pervades material culture and is about so much more than music. Rapper Trae the Truth provided a non-capitalistic example of Hip Hop-based community building by identifying as Hip Hop through his founding of Angel by Nature, a natural disaster relief fund supporting Houston and surrounding areas, which was inspired by his own experience surviving hurricane Harvey in 2017.<sup>83</sup>

Communally and capitalistically, Houston Hip Hop entrepreneurs have been giving back and (re)creating Hip Hop in underfunded communities in various ways for decades. As Faniel notes, “Houston’s rap artists and label owners created a business model that often emphasized local sales over national exposure.”<sup>84</sup> I posit that this mentality still exists in the minds of many Houston Hip Hop entrepreneurs, confirming that Hip Hop is about so much more than rap music. Hip Hop entrepreneurs in the city continue to pay homage to their Southern roots, placing Hip Hop Houston and the Hip Hop South above, simply put, selling out for mainstream fame.

Kidricc agreed there are high-caliber Houston artists who give back to their communities because that is a stake and a price to be paid while growing up collectively Black in the South and particularly in Houston, Texas. “I definitely think the collective struggle of being Black and Brown in the South and Texas definitely creates a different type of unity. You have to keep in mind that it’s 2022 and there are still towns that it’s not safe for me to be in as a Black man. Texas is its own country and racism is still very alive and well, and we all are reminded of that on a constant basis, so it has created a sense of unity that doesn’t exist in other places because we have a common enemy.”<sup>85</sup> When digging a little deeper into this collective sentiment of being southern and grounded, it seems Hip Hop Houston sets itself apart from Hip Hop entrepreneurialism

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<sup>81</sup> James, personal interview.

<sup>82</sup> Brittany Britto Garley. “Bun B’s Trill Burgers Wins *Good Morning America*’s Best Burger Competition,” *Eater Houston*, July 29, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> *Angel by Nature*, non-profit organization and relief fund, <https://www.angelbynature.com>

<sup>84</sup> Faniel, *Hip Hop in Houston*, 25.

<sup>85</sup> James, personal interview.

in other cities. According to James, “I can say that our stars are still in touch with the communities that they come from, but I think that comes from just a Southern tradition of family ... we don’t get caught up in the glamor because truth be told, glamor really isn’t something that exists down here ... it’s just the way we were raised.”<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

Scholars such as Maco Faniel, Regina N. Bradley, Lance Scott Walker, and others will continue to inspire up-and-coming academics to ensure that the voices and stories of the Hip Hop South will be heard and examined through an academic lens. As Bradley puts it, “The South is not a monolith. The criticism that engages it should also be non-monolithic.”<sup>87</sup> Studying Hip Hop-based entrepreneurialism and the resulting community-building practices (or lack thereof) should continue to be explored and represented in the academy in order to understand the truth and tenacity of what Hip Hop truly is: a collective consciousness not bound by space and time. Hopefully this study will encourage Hip Hop academics to examine Hip Hop in other cities, states, and countries through a lens of Hip Hop entrepreneurialism. It would be important to understand how Hip Hop entrepreneurs outside of emcees, artists and repertoires, and producers contribute to the conversations around Hip Hop entrepreneurialism in Hip Hop Houston, the Hip Hop South, and Hip Hop globally.

Further study is needed relating to the Hip Hop South regarding the nine underrepresented foundations of Hip Hop culture that Daniel White Hodge suggests (excluding Emceeing): entrepreneurialism, DJing and turntablism, breaking, break dancing and b-boying, graffiti, break beats, street knowledge, street language, street fashion, and knowledge of God and self.<sup>88</sup> As other scholars of Hip Hop and the Hip Hop South have suggested, the Hip Hop South should be dissected and studied in greater detail than just highlighting musical contributions and storytelling through rap music alone. Other elements of the foundation of Hip Hop should be examined to understand the larger contribution that Hip Hop has had locally, nationally, and globally, providing place-based and financial success to those who otherwise may not have achieved it and may have continued to exist on the peripheries of societies riddled by poverty and violence.

I contend that Hip Hoppas globally can identify with Hip Hop Houston and the Hip Hop South because of the Hip Hop South’s ability to cultivate “a communal identity and [provide] multiple ways of resistance”<sup>89</sup> because Hip Hop actors around the world can identify with being resisters, existing on the peripheries of society, existing in racist societies, and forging their own come-up despite being displaced, treated as scapegoats

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<sup>86</sup> James, personal interview.

<sup>87</sup> Bradley, *Chronicling Stankonia*.

<sup>88</sup> Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 43.

<sup>89</sup> Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop,” 16.

exposed to violence, and oppressed worldwide. Further study of Hip Hop Houston and the Hip Hop South will contribute to the field of Hip Hop studies, recognizing that the study of the Hip Hop South is an authentic study of Hip Hop's global identity, and can contribute to the global perspective of the field.

Understanding place-based entrepreneurialism will also contribute to understanding the ways in which Hip Hop entrepreneurialism shifts across regional boundaries, space, and time, and that the possibilities of a global, "Digital Hip Hop South" exist today.<sup>90</sup> Can we study the Hip Hop South and the specific forms of entrepreneurialism and resistance on a global scale? Discussions of the Hip Hop South and Hip Hop Houston entrepreneurialism provide one way to ground understandings of what Hip Hop truly is, outside of rap music and lyrical analysis.

The more I study and live Hip Hop, the more I will assert that Hip Hop is innately self-sufficient and entrepreneurial and persists outside of the traditional approval of authorities, mainstream businesses, and rules. Defying legal systems, structures, the need for seed money, and the need for a business license or even entrepreneurs having MBAs, Hip Hop entrepreneurialism is a foundational reality in all things Hip Hop. Hip Hop entrepreneurialism is founded on creativity and adaptability. In fact, some Hip Hoppas learn the ins and outs of owning a business and running it well before they brand themselves and their peers *as* a Hip Hop business. This aspect of Hip Hop as innately entrepreneurial is one of the paramount foundations of what defined Hip Hop in Houston, Hip Hop in the South, and I argue, Hip Hop around the world. Hip Hop academics should study the Hip Hop South and contribute to the further realization that elements outside of emceeing will capture more of the true identity and grit of what Hip Hop really is.

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<sup>90</sup> Bradley, *Chronicling Stankonia*.

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