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Race, Class, and Place in the Origins of Techno and Rap Music

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ABSTRACT
While the connection between geographic space and art has been thoroughly examined in the case of rap music, the study of this relationship in the case of techno has not progressed beyond the assertion that machine-like techno music with minimal human presence reflected the industrial production which characterized automobile manufacturing in Detroit. However, this ignores the fact that many of the early pioneers of techno, including Juan Atkins and Derrick May, actually grew up outside the city, in the suburb of Belleville, Michigan. This stands in contrast to the story of the origins of rap music, with the musical form and its producers coming out of the South Bronx. This article compares historical accounts of the origins of techno and rap music to show how race interacted with place, as well as with social class, to produce two different musical styles. Using ideas presented by the anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book Purity and Danger, I explain the unique characteristics of the two musical styles as ritualistic attempts to preserve or create social order in the face of these conditions.

In the last 25 years, numerous scholars have examined the origins of rap music and hip-hop culture as well as the roots of techno music (Albiez; Brewster and Broughton, Last Night; Chang; Forman; May; Rose; Sicko; Williams). One notable characteristic of the analyses of rap compared to the analyses of techno is that both musical styles are portrayed as products of the emergence of postindustrial America. If that is the whole story, then how do we account for the clear sonic differences between rap and techno? Despite the numerous parallels between them – both are disc-jockey-based musical genres that emerged during the late 1970s–early 1980s – rap and techno are very distinct musical styles. The most obvious difference between them, for example, is the lack of vocals in most techno (May 331). Although rap and techno in the United States are identified with black communities, rap music’s roots are generally traced to New York City, specifically to the borough of the South Bronx. Techno, meanwhile, has its American roots in the city of Detroit. More specifically, the three artists who are often identified as founding fathers of American techno (Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson) lived in the Detroit suburb of Belleville. The founders of rap and techno had very different relationships with the cities associated with each respective
musical genre, and I argue that these relationships helped shape the musical styles themselves.

In this article, I compare New York City/the South Bronx with Detroit/Belleville to identify contrasts that can help explain the distinct musical styles of rap and techno. The basis of this comparison is the contention that musical styles themselves, such as rap and techno, constitute rituals on the societal level. The theoretical foundation for this comes from Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*, an anthropological analysis of pollution originally published in 1966. To bolster my arguments, I draw from the abundant scholarship on rap, techno, and race in the United States. As stated above, many scholars have written about these two musical styles. This research includes oral histories (Brewster and Broughton, *Record Players*; Chang) in which rap and techno artists tell their own stories in their own words. I make use of this work, especially regarding techno music. At this point, the stories of rap and techno have been told in detail. What I am doing here is tying these stories together under one theoretical umbrella for the first time.

In the next section, I outline the arguments presented in Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* and in various commentaries on her work. Then I apply Douglas’s ideas to the history of rap music, which was an attempt to maintain social order in the face of disruptive urban-renewal projects, especially the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway. The subsequent section examines the connection between techno music and social order, still using Mary Douglas as a guide. After that, I argue that the suburban, middle-class roots of techno’s founders help explain why their music did not take a stance of protest against the decline of the city of Detroit. In the concluding section, I consider my arguments in light of broader theories of race and politics.

**Purity and Danger**

In *Purity and Danger*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas analyzes the ways in which societies identify pollution/dirt and ritualistically maintain social order. Douglas compares different cultural interpretations and definitions of “pollution,” as well as various ritualistic responses to such pollution. She conceptualizes pollution as “matter out of place” (41), which societies identify and ritualistically purge in various ways. Writing about Douglas’s work, Wolkowitz contends that “[r]eflections about purity and pollution are actually reflections about order and disorder, form and formlessness, being and nonbeing. Hence, nothing is dirty in itself; dirt only exists because, as matter out of place, it lies outside and threatens the social system” (17). So, Douglas’s conception of dirt/pollution centers on violations of social order. According to Douglas, the definition of pollution outlined above “implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” (36). Although *Purity and Danger* is filled with examples from anthropological studies of various “primitive” societies, Campkin emphasizes that “it is an important aspect of Douglas’s work that she attempts to move beyond the conventional boundaries of her own discipline in highlighting parallels between ‘primitive’ and contemporary Western societies” (72). In other words, Douglas’s work frees the study of dirt and pollution from the explicit examination of topics such as hygiene and allows us to look at symbolic violations of social order and at the responses to those violations. The following analysis of rap and techno music emerges from this insight, by
comparing the two musical styles as symbolic responses to violations of the social order in their respective social contexts.

Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* continues to influence scholarship to the present day. In 2016, an edited volume of original essays celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Douglas’s book (Duschinsky, Schnall, and Weiss). Given Douglas’s focus on purity as cleanliness, it is not surprising that much of the scholarship that she influenced has a similar focus on literal dirt and pollution (Campkin; Wolkowitz). In her examination of underground rap and reggae in Puerto Rico, however, Rivera applies Douglas’s ideas to the realm of music. Rivera uses a framework derived from Douglas to understand the ways in which the Puerto Rican government, as well as more established (i.e. non-"underground") artists, marginalized rap and reggae. According to Rivera, “Mary Douglas’s notion of symbolic pollution proves a useful concept in illuminating this situation” (125). Recognizing the way that the marginalization of some groups can bolster the social solidarity of the rest of society, Rivera writes that, “as underground participants were demonized, the general public found comfort in understanding the source of evil and disorder” (123, Rivera’s emphasis). Rivera’s work provides a useful entry into the application of Douglas’s ideas to a social phenomenon (music) that is not explicitly related to dirt or pollution. In that sense, my analysis of rap and techno below follows in the same path. My work differs from Rivera’s, however, in that I focus on the way in which artists who were “underground” in the United States have also perceived social disorder and responded to it in their own work. I contend that rap and techno are best understood as reactions to the disorder that prevailed in their distinct social contexts.

In my application of Douglas’s analytical framework, music constitutes a ritualistic attempt to symbolically purge that which does not belong. Douglas writes that “analysis of ritual symbolism cannot begin until we recognise ritual as an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture” (129). In the cases of rap and techno, these musical genres symbolically identified and purged matter that was “out of place” within the social contexts of the South Bronx and Detroit, respectively, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The musical styles themselves aesthetically reflected this purging, as I will demonstrate below.

In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas writes: “Four kinds of social pollution seem worth distinguishing. The first is danger pressing on external boundaries” (123). I argue that this type of social pollution corresponds to the case of rap music’s origins. In New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s, “pollution” (in the sense employed by Douglas) took the form of invasive construction like the Cross Bronx Expressway, which is cited in historical studies of rap as a major motivating factor in the emergence of the musical style (Chang; Rose). Conditions in the South Bronx threatened the community that existed in the borough. The musical style that emerged, rap, was a ritualistic response to this pollution. As I discuss below, rap music has always had an extremely territorial orientation, with artists representing their neighborhoods or cities. I interpret this territoriality as an attempt to demonstrate neighborhood resilience in the face of the urban redevelopment that was disrupting established communities.

The case of Detroit and techno, however, is different. I contend that this corresponds to the fourth kind of social pollution described by Douglas. She calls this “danger from internal contradiction, when some of the basic postulates are denied by other postulates, so that at certain points the system seems to be at war with itself” (124). Historical accounts of techno music do not cite invasive forces but rather the wholesale abandonment of Detroit’s city center by whites and by many blacks as well (Sicko; Williams).
Sugrue’s historical account of post-World War II Detroit makes it clear that many black neighborhoods in the city were decimated by highway construction (47), but this is where the suburban perspective of the Belleville Three becomes important to consider. This highway construction was not an encroachment into their own neighborhoods, as was the case for the founders of rap. Whereas I contend that the earliest rappers viewed themselves as at war with invasive forces, from the outside perspective of the suburban Belleville Three, Detroit appeared to be a city at war with itself. In this context, the “matter out of place” was humanity itself, resulting in a musical style virtually devoid of human presence (in the form of lyrics, for example). When lyrics do exist in classic techno songs, they are often electronically processed to sound robotic and nonhuman.

Rap Music

In the case of rap music, historians of the genre (Chang; Rose) identify events in the South Bronx, specifically the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, as pivotal to its origin. Rose describes how “postindustrial conditions were exacerbated by disruptions considered an ‘unexpected side effect’ of the larger politically motivated policies of ‘urban renewal’,” (30) which displaced borough residents, many of whom were already economically vulnerable. According to Hebdige, by the 1970s the South Bronx “had been a mainly black and Hispanic ghetto for decades” (137). Many of the “disruptions” referred to by Rose were consequences of the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which took place during the 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, according to Rose, “some 60,000 Bronx houses were razed” (31). Rose states that, “although the neighborhoods under attack had a substantial Jewish population, black and Puerto Rican residents were disproportionately affected” (31) by the construction of the expressway through the Bronx. The black and Puerto Rican populations of the South Bronx formed the nucleus of early rap music and hip-hop culture, and Rose asserts that the sound of early rap reflected the disruption in the surrounding environment. For example, rapping itself “privileges flow, layering, and ruptures in line” (39), while “the initial bass or drum line in rap music is abruptly ruptured by scratching” (39).

In an interview with Mark Dery for his book Flame Wars, Tricia Rose argues that “we can read hip-hop as the response of urban people of color to the postindustrial landscape. Although most people do not have the power to structurally transform the worlds they live in, many attempt microscopic responses to things that appear in their landscapes” (Dery 213). I interpret rap music as this type of reaction. This interpretation is consistent with Mary Douglas’s analysis of pollution. Note Rose’s choice of words such as “disruption” and “attack” to describe what took place in the Bronx, especially in the South Bronx, “where demolition was most devastating” (31). In a passage from Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas asserts: “When the community is attacked from the outside...the external danger fosters solidarity within” (141). In his discussion of Douglas, Campkin points out that “[p]ollution and prohibition are discussed in terms of borders and boundaries, and threats to those borders and boundaries” (69). The “matter out of place,” to use Douglas’s phrase, was the Cross Bronx Expressway, attacking and disrupting an established community. The birth of rap music was a ritualistic defense of territory, an attempt to symbolically purge the invasive forces reshaping the South Bronx. This helps explain why so much early rap
music had an explicitly territorial quality, with rappers speaking out as representatives of their respective boroughs. Examples of this territoriality include the “Bridge Wars,” which pitted Queens (represented by Marley Marl) against the South Bronx (represented by Boogie Down Productions) in the late 1980s (Muhammad and Kelley). The East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry of the 1990s is another example of this geographical focus. Even today, cities like Atlanta are known for their unique sonic contributions to rap music. Geography has played such a significant role in rap music since its earliest days that Murray Forman wrote an entire book about the topic, asserting that, “[i]n hip-hop, space is a dominant concern, occupying a central role in the definition of value, meaning, and practice” (3). During the same period that rap was emerging, techno music also grew out of its originators’ unique relationship with postindustrial urban space, with different musical consequences. The ideas of Douglas provide an explanatory framework to account for techno’s distinct sound as well.

Techno Music

The founders of techno are generally acknowledged to be three friends, Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night; May; Sicko; Williams). They were men who moved away from the city of Detroit as children, spending years (including high school) living “thirty miles away from the collapsing city center, in the mostly white suburb of Belleville” (Williams 159). Ultimately, all the “Belleville Three” moved back to the city of Detroit, where they encountered a city that had been reduced to a ghost town. As in the case of the South Bronx, Detroit was a city that was torn apart by highway construction (Sugrue 47). Crucially, however, Detroit had also decayed from the inside. Detroit had been a dominant global manufacturing center in the mid-twentieth century, but, as Williams describes, “the combination of ever-increasing mechanization of production and new forms of global outsourcing... had all but eroded that dominance by the 1980s” (157).

Whereas I interpret rap music as the symbolic, defensive reaction of a community under threat, the Belleville Three opted to symbolically turn away from this world and look to a mechanized future. Williams points out that, “even as techno soundtracks the decaying industry of Detroit, it leaves the city behind for the new global space of postindustrial capitalism” (155). Techno “music was a response to the painful contradictions of the city’s changing economy, a form of science fiction that provided an aesthetic solution to Detroit’s problems. Escapist in a positive rather than a negative sense, techno provided a way for its producers to both symbolically and literally imagine themselves into the future” (Williams 160). So, rap and techno both are musical styles that attempt to create order from a disordered world. Whereas rap music was the music of fighting to defend physical territory to reimpose order, techno abandoned the physical realm for a new, “deterritorialised” (Albiez 140) order.

Thinking from the perspective of Mary Douglas about the social context of Detroit at the time of techno’s creation, the “matter out of place” was humanity itself. The view of humanity being out of place in Detroit and in techno music is supported on three levels. First, returning to the city center from Belleville, the founders of techno found a city from which large numbers of people had moved away. In his history of techno music, Sicko asserts: “If there’s one thing to be learned from examining Detroit and its
musicians, it’s how African-American artists grew up in (and wanted to be part of) a city that was increasingly alien to them” (65). Williams describes techno as “music devoid of cultural and human reference points” (163–64). I argue that the Belleville Three’s return to a depopulated city created a dilemma of not belonging, of literally being “out of place.” Techno resolved the dilemma by removing the human presence from the music.

A second way in which human beings were out of place in Detroit in the late 1970s and early 1980s relates to mechanization of the automobile industry in Detroit. The auto industry had been the driving force behind the economic growth of the city. However, by the time the men from Belleville moved back to the city, robots had taken many of the auto-manufacturing jobs that had once been performed by human beings. Kevin Saunderson recalls Juan Atkins telling him: “Berry Gordy built the Motown sound on the same principles as the conveyor belt system at Ford’s [sic]. Today their plants don’t work that way—they use robots and computers to make the cars. I’m probably more interested in Ford’s robots than in Berry Gordy’s music” (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night 332). Techno music heals the ruptures caused by postindustrialization in human communities. It removes the humans from music, thereby restoring order. As Williams points out: “Techno lets the machines take over to a limited degree; it is impossible to imagine a human being physically playing the music in real time” (163).

There is an irony associated with human beings creating techno, a musical style that “was post-human in affect if not quite in construction” (Williams 154). Specifically, why would humans create music that implicitly celebrates the absence of people? This irony reflects an ambivalent attitude toward the manufacturing labor that characterized Detroit, even before many of the jobs were mechanized. This ambivalence is conveyed in the 1996 documentary film Universal Techno, which includes interview footage with Derrick May as he explains how much the auto industry permeated the city of Detroit. May states:

At one point or another everybody has a family member who works in the [auto] industry. So the effect is indirectly there. It’s not necessarily a positive effect; it’s also a very unfeeling, cold effect. A machine has no love nor any feeling, and sometimes the people that work for these machines end up having no feeling nor love, because they’re working relentless hours, putting in total commitment, to something that is giving nothing back.

On one hand, this serves as a fascinating elaboration on the theme of alienated labor, especially at a time in the United States when many lament the loss of well-paid, manufacturing jobs. At the same time, May’s remarks are further evidence of the conflicted, sometimes contradictory, relationship between techno music and the post-industrial economy. Techno celebrates mechanization while simultaneously seeming to recognize the depressing desolation that it brings.

The contradictions that I have just pointed out – humans creating music that implicitly celebrates the absence of people, mechanized music rooted in recognition of the downside of mechanization – draw attention to the ways in which techno was a reaction to the fourth type of social pollution identified by Douglas. This is “the system at war with itself” (141), exemplified by “social structures which rest on grave paradox or contradiction” (147). Postwar Detroit leading up to the birth of techno was a city of contradiction. Sugrue
quotes Henry Ford II, who paradoxically stated in 1955: “Obsolescence is the very hallmark of progress” (125). The contradiction in the social structure is reflected in techno music, in which human obsolescence is also a sign of progress to the future. In her discussion of this type of social pollution, Douglas cites numerous examples from cultures around the world; most of these examples in some way involve pollution from interaction between the sexes (158). While sexual pollution is not at issue in the case of techno, it is notable that each of the examples cited by Douglas revolves around a “dangerous situation which has to be handled with washings and avoidances” (158). In other words, one of the main ways in which societies respond to this type of pollution is by mandating, for example, that men and women do not interact for a time. This strategy of avoidance is similar to the way in which techno music purges the human element.

There is a third way to identify humans as the “matter out of place” in techno music. Derrick May describes how out-of-place he felt in high school in Belleville, where he experienced “voluntary segregation” for the first time. While he was physically segregated from the white students in places like the school lunchroom, May’s comments about his relationship to his fellow black students suggest that his sense of alienation from them, which was more emotional or cultural, might have been deeper. Describing sitting with other black students in the lunchroom, May says he “pitied these people. I sat back there with them for the rest of the year with pure disgust. I found myself entertained by my own people. I felt like, ‘This is fucked up.’ And I made a promise to myself that I was going to be better than that” (Brewster and Broughton, Record Players 308). I expand on these remarks below in the discussion of the intersection of class and race in techno. I mention May’s comments here to reinforce my argument that techno music originated as a musical style about human beings’ lack of belonging on multiple levels, in both urban and suburban contexts. As Brewster and Broughton declare, “[t]he story of Detroit techno is a tale of dislocation” (Record Players 307), and, following from the perspective of Mary Douglas, dislocated matter (in this case, dislocated people) is matter out of place. When asked to speculate about what type of lyrics his songs would have if they were not instrumentals, Derrick May replies that there would be lyrics “making reference to somehow saving the world” (Brewster and Broughton, Record Players 314). Techno music constitutes an attempt to create a new, pure order, but it is unclear what role humans would play in such an order.

Race, Class, and (No?) Protest

One ironic consequence of the erasure of the human element from early techno music has been the relative invisibility of its black founders. Recently, some journalists (DeVito; Ross) have raised this issue, lamenting the lack of awareness of techno’s black roots as white DJs currently make money producing the music. In part, this could be because Detroit techno’s initial popularity came in Europe, where bands like Kraftwerk, composed entirely of white members, were already making somewhat-similar music. In comparing techno to previous styles of music that emerged from Detroit’s black community, Walters explains this racial invisibility as a consequence of white flight from the city. Afterward, “blackness no longer needed to be defined in the specific context of Detroit. Demographic and political changes in the past 20 years had rendered the city overwhelmingly African American” (Walters 130). In other words, in a predominantly black environment, there was no need for the Belleville Three to
explicitly assert their blackness. It is worth remembering, however, that the early techno artists did grow up in a racially integrated suburb. In that light, Albiez’s explanation for the relative invisibility of race in early techno is insightful. According to Albiez, techno “is informed by a progressive desire to move beyond essentialized ‘blackness’” (143, Albiez’s emphasis). This is a consequence of two interacting factors: “[t]he suburban upbringing of Atkins, May and Saunderson and the demarcated Detroit party scene,” which “meant that black communal solidarity was questioned and explicitly dismantled by proto-Techno” (145). The combination of attending racially integrated schools and attending class-exclusive black parties meant that asserting their racial identity through their music was not foremost on the minds of techno’s pioneers. Schaub discusses the ways in which the Belleville Three were more likely to view themselves in class terms than in racial terms.

When we examine the role of race in techno music, as well as in rap music, the issue of social class clearly arises. Whereas rap music emerged from a relatively impoverished environment, “the cultural milieu out of which techno emerged was suburban and affluent” (Williams 159). This included the Belleville Three, who grew up in “middle class, upper middle class families” (Brewster and Broughton, Record Players 309). These affluent young blacks “went beyond the usual high school social cliques to organize a more formalized approach to dances and parties—Detroit’s ‘party clubs’” (Sicko 33). In the previous section I quoted Derrick May’s description of his experience in a segregated high-school lunchroom. The rest of that anecdote suggests the existence of a cultural divide, which I argue was rooted in class differences, between May and his fellow black students. In May’s words, while sitting at one of four all-black tables in the lunchroom, “these black kids, they would stand up and throw French fries at each other, and just scream obscenities, back and forth, and it was a culture shock for me. It blew me away. I had never experienced voluntary segregation. And I think that changed me. That was a defining moment in my life, because it put me...it made me feel outside who I thought I was” (Brewster and Broughton, Record Players 308). The last phrase, about feeling “outside who I thought I was,” describes another form of the alienation that I have mentioned previously, whether it was the alienation of labor, a sense of dislocation from the city itself, or any of the other varieties of “matter out of place” that I have discussed to this point. Techno originated as music made by outsiders.

Unfortunately, Brewster and Broughton do not ask May to elaborate further by explaining exactly “who [he] thought he was” prior to this incident; did May mean that he had previously thought of himself as not significantly different from other black students? Regardless of the answer to this question, I interpret May’s comments as evidence of a class divide or at least evidence that May and his lunch mates possessed different sets of class signifiers. As May stated, “most of the people we [the Belleville Three] associated with were upper middle class to very rich” (Brewster and Broughton, Record Players 309). While I cannot say with certainty whether the family incomes of the other black students in the lunchroom described by May placed them below his socioeconomic class level, it is clear from May’s comments that he found their behavior lacking the cultural capital and decorum associated with the Detroit party club scene.

I contend that techno’s origins in the suburban, middle- and upper-middle-class black community are a major reason why early techno music lacked the spirit of defiance and protest that characterized much early rap music. Examples of this defiant spirit include
Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five’s “The Message,” Kurtis Blow’s “Hard Times” (originally released in 1980 and covered in 1983 by Run-D.M.C.), and Boogie Down Productions’ “South Bronx.” Williams points out that, “[r]ather than criticizing the deteriorating conditions of Detroit, techno producers took those conditions as a fatalistic given to build from, a real-life sci-fi scenario” (161). Contrast this with rappers, whose reaction to the deteriorating conditions around them was generally much more combative and defensive. The lack of defensiveness on the part of early techno was an outgrowth of the suburban roots of the music’s originators. As literal outsiders, who spent their formative, high-school years living outside the city of Detroit, the Belleville Three did not necessarily view the abandonment of the city as something that could have destroyed their homes. This is very different from the way that the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway posed an existential threat to swaths of the South Bronx. Similarly, the Belleville Three’s own, relatively comfortable, socioeconomic status insulated them from the effects of Detroit’s economic decline. As a result, whereas early rap seemed to focus on defending and representing existing neighborhoods, “[i]n a city wiped out by the loss of faith in progress, techno tried to construct a new belief in the future” (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night 320–21).

This insider/outsider contrast between the founders of rap and techno is the basis of another insight from Douglas into the different social dynamics behind the two musical styles. I mentioned above that Douglas distinguishes four types of social pollution, and I argue that the case of Detroit techno qualifies as an example of a system “at war with itself” (124). Objectively speaking, events in Detroit and in New York City preceding the emergence of techno and rap were not that different from each other. As various commentators have noted, both cities transitioned to a postindustrial economy and both cities saw highway construction that disrupted large sections of their respective black communities. Regarding the founders of techno and rap, the crucial difference between their experiences of these urban developments was a difference in perspective. Blacks in the South Bronx experienced urban redevelopment as an invasion into their space. The Belleville Three watched from the suburbs while the city of Detroit destroyed itself; they were not so much victims of a tragedy as they were witnesses to it. In the film Universal Techno, while taking photos inside a once-glamorous theatre that had been converted into a parking garage, May states that he does not feel sad about the loss of such historical landmarks. Instead, he feels “angry at stupid people, because nobody cares about, in America, especially, nobody cares about these kind of things, you know? People in America tend to let this kind of shit just die, let it go, [with] no sort of respect for the history of this.”

**Conclusion**

When we consider that rap and techno were both DJ-based musical styles that emerged from black communities during the same time period, it is surprising that there have not been more efforts to compare them and to understand how the circumstances in their respective cities of origin shaped them aesthetically. Williams alludes to the parallels between rap and techno, but this reference is relegated to a footnote. He suggests that “techno, with its evocation of a Tofflerian (Toffler, The Third Wave) world of edge city info-commuters, could be considered to constitute a “suburban” complement to what Tricia Rose described as hip-hop’s response by “urban people of color to
the postindustrial landscape” (174). In this article, I have attempted to explore the complementary aspects of rap and techno while drawing attention to significant differences between the two musical styles and their origins. Whereas rap emerged in reaction to incursion into the South Bronx, techno was itself the product of disconnection on multiple levels. According to the arguments set forth by Mary Douglas, the former situation leads to greater social solidarity to repel the “matter out of place,” whereas the latter situation is one in which people themselves are out of place and must be symbolically erased.

In light of history, it is important to acknowledge the sensitivity of any discussion of “erasing the humanity” of black people. Weheliye asserts: “Because New World black subjects were denied access to the position of humanity for so long, ‘humanity’ refuses to signify any ontological primacy within Afro-diasporic discourses” (27). Rejecting terms like “dehumanized,” Weheliye suggests that, “[f]rom nineteenth-century spirituals through the blues, jazz, soul, hip hop, and techno, the human and the posthuman are in constant dynamic tension” (30). Given the futuristic orientation of early techno music, “posthuman” definitely sounds like a more accurate and fitting descriptor than “dehumanized.”

DeVito and Beta also criticize the media for ignoring the “political” techno from Detroit, which expressed more criticism of social conditions. However, those political techno performers emerged after the Belleville Three. Since I am more focused in this article on techno’s origins than on its evolution, I have centered more on the Belleville Three. Schaub, like Albiez, acknowledges the way in which the Belleville Three’s suburban roots made them less likely to present their music as an explicitly black product. However, Schaub interprets this as a political statement in itself, asserting that “these artists emphasized a political and cultural vision to which—at least in their understanding—an insistence on the link between [racial] identity and social location was not too important.” This is a useful reminder that “political” music is not limited to music that explicitly addresses politics.

While writing this article, I have taken to heart some of the criticisms of academic writing about techno music that have been voiced by figures such as Brewster and Broughton, who warn against “a tendency to extrapolate [techno’s] construction methods and its supposed subject matter to support some rather overblown critical theorizing” (Last Night 322). Academic writers are not the only ones guilty of this tendency, as “the producers [of techno] saw that intellectualizing their music would help them promote it” (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night 322). This realization on the part of people like Juan Atkins and Derrick May came while they participated in interviews about techno with music journalists, some from the United Kingdom. After these “journalists laid the postindustrial imagery on thick” (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night 322), the Belleville Three “did a good job of rewriting the music’s history, retrospectively adding layers of intriguing philosophy to their work” (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night 322).

My intention was to avoid this pitfall, in part by relying on the work of Mary Douglas, a mid twentieth-century anthropologist. Her arguments in Purity and Danger strike me as more elegant and less “overblown” than writing that sounds like Alvin Toffler’s The Third Wave, the 1980 book of utopian prophecy that influenced the Belleville Three (Williams 155). Douglas’s insights are straightforward, yet I contend that they open a new avenue to understand the ritualistic power of music as a reaction
to disruptive social forces. Viewing a musical style as an attempt to (re)establish order in the social world makes it possible to ask the question: What is the “matter out of place” that must be eliminated to maintain social order? In the case of rap music, histories of the music identify the incursion of the Cross Bronx Expressway into the South Bronx as a major catalyst of the music. This territorial invasion constituted the matter out of place that rap music symbolically repelled. The founders of techno, meanwhile, lived in a significantly different social context from early rappers. As I have argued above, the matter out of place in techno was humanity itself, and this resulted in a musical style with minimal human presence. By grounding my argument in the work of Douglas, I hope to have demonstrated the relevance of twentieth-century social theory to even the most futuristic musical culture.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

William Tsitsos is Associate Professor of Sociology at Towson University. His research and teaching focus on the sociology of culture and religion. His article, “Racial Transparency Theory Applied to Musicians Who Claim to Be Aliens” appeared in *Popular Music and Society* in 2014.

**Works cited**


**Film and Video**


**Songs and Recordings**

**Songs**


Recordings


