Rebellion, Rap, and Rodney King: The Intersection Between the 1992 Rodney King Uprising and Gangsta Rap Music in South Central Los Angeles

This thesis explores the interaction between the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles and gangsta rap, a subgenre of rap music that originated in Los Angeles in the late 1980s. Gangsta rap emerged in the late 1980s as a cultural response to the same social and economic factors which led to the April 1992 uprising: police brutality, President Ronald Reagan’s war on drugs, white flight, mass incarceration of black men, high unemployment, and poverty. Prior to the 1992 uprising in Los Angeles, gangsta rappers, such as N.W.A. and Ice Cube, explored the experiences, struggles, and hardships of life in urban, low-income areas. These artists gave voice to frustrated young, black men who dreamed of finding a way out of the ghetto. However, this genre also addressed, and some would argue glamorized, more controversial topics, such as gang activity, violence, and misogyny. Ultimately, the brutal conditions of life in working-class, black Los Angeles produced both art and violent rebellion, both predicting and explaining the other. Despite gangsta rap’s broad audience, evidenced by millions of record sales, its listeners were unable to read hip hop as a political text and instead relegated the music to mere entertainment. The six most prominent gangsta rappers at the time, Ice-T, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Tupac, reacted to the riots in a myriad of ways – from proclaiming a desire to murder law enforcers to turning away and disengaging from political art.

Sources Include: