“The Once and Future Audubon:” The History of the Audubon Ballroom and the Movement to Save It

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“The Once and Future Audubon:” The History of the Audubon Ballroom and the Movement to Save It

by

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the history of the Save the Audubon Movement – an activist movement in the 1980s and early 1990s protesting Columbia University’s plan to demolish the Audubon Ballroom and replace it with a modern biomedical research complex. The Audubon Ballroom is best known for being the site of Malcolm X’s assassination and was a major landmark to New York Hispanic and African Americans. It takes a cultural history lens, giving special attention on the emerging hip-hop culture that became the primary voice of protest in New York City in the 1970s through the 90s. This paper begins with an analysis of Columbia University’s long practice of buying and bulldozing over land where Black other people of color in New York City lived. It then gives a complete history of the Audubon Ballroom, including a detailed architectural overview, its relationship with Jewish, Latinx, and Black New Yorkers, its use by Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and its eventual purchase by the city and decay. The paper then details the origins and early history of hip-hop culture and its role as a voice against urban redevelopment. The final chapter is a complete overview of Columbia’s plans for the Audubon, the many voices of resistance against those plans, and the eventual compromise between the two.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“There couldn’t be no better indictment of the people who destroyed the Audubon than for someone to come to the Audubon to see the beautiful terracotta façade, [...] and then to go around to where the theater was, this enormous theater, and to see a parking lot. A parking lot that could be put any old where. It could have been put underground! A parking lot. The Audubon was destroyed for a parking lot. That was a valuable lesson to realize that something is something versus nothing.”

- Michael Henry Adams

The William Fox Audubon. The Beverly Hills. The San Juan Theater. Since its construction in 1912, the Audubon Ballroom has gone by many names. Located in Washington Heights on the corner of Broadway and 165th, the Audubon has served as a center for Manhattan entertainment and politics for disparate communities. Jewish, Black, Dominican and other Latinx Americans have all laid claim to it at some time or another. But its greatest legacy is being the site of Malcolm X’s final speech – and murder. Using the space as the weekly meeting-place for his Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) since 1964, on February 21, 1965, Malcolm – or Malik El-Shabazz at this point – was gunned down by former Nation of Islam comrades while on stage delivering a speech. Despite the Audubon’s proximity to a massive hospital

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complex, Presbyterian Hospital, El-Shabazz was left on the street to succumb to his wounds.

Following El-Shabazz’s murder, the theatre was used throughout the 1970s to showcase popular Latin American films, hold cultural celebrations from the local Latinx and African American communities, and host concerts until it was closed to the public by the city in 1980.² It continued to be used as storage for various City offices and meeting space for a handful of local organizations. But in 1983, Columbia University proclaimed that – with the assistance of New York City and the New York and New Jersey Port Authority – they would demolish this iconic landmark and replace it with a state-of-the-art biomedical center.

Almost immediately, the neighborhood exploded. Manhattan residents, Columbia students and faculty, and professional preservationists rallied to save even a portion of the Audubon. The local African American and Latinx populations jumped to its defense. Organizations like the December 12th Movement, Alianza Dominicana, and the newly formed Malcolm X Save the Audubon Coalition (STAC) held rallies almost weekly at both the Ballroom and on Columbia’s campus, almost weekly. They raised further awareness through benefit concerts, newspaper editorials, and city planning meetings. They were not alone, either. Some older Jewish residents defended the Audubon’s continued existence, recalling how it had once been used as a synagogue, Jewish community center, and safe-haven from Jews fleeing from the Third Reich.³ More left-

² I refer to Malcolm X as Malik El-Shabazz here since that was his name at time of death. Throughout the rest of this essay, however, I refer to him as Malcolm X for continuity’s sake along with the fact that all sources consulted refer to him as Malcolm.
wing and sympathetic whites, especially Columbia students, rejected the plans for the Audubon, for various reasons: solidarity with their peers of color, a desire to prevent further Columbia-driven gentrification, recognition of the building’s architectural significance.

The most intense criticisms lobbed was that this plan was being driven by Columbia University, whose long history of taking over primarily Black and Latinx neighborhoods and landmarks was not lost on protestors. And despite promises that it would boost the local economy, most of the jobs would go to university faculty, allies, and specialized scientists from across the country. Columbia’s leadership, meanwhile, held no punches about what they thought of the Audubon: it was a “wasteland,” an “eyesore,” and was simply impossible (read: cost more money than they cared to spend) to save. The plan to turn it into a bio-medical center also struck a nerve. Activists denounced it as insensitive to the history of America’s treatment of people of color, worried that local residents would be used as “guinea pigs.”

Others believed that the Audubon should be saved based on its architectural beauty. Designed by Thomas Lamb – one of the most famous and prolific theatre and film palace architects in the United States during the turn of the century – the Ballroom’s façade was an icon and its interior was similarly well loved. Indeed, in the early 1980s, the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) deemed the Audubon eligible to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, although it never was. In fact, in

1984 SHPO argued that the building could still be saved, albeit with extreme and immediate preservation and rehabilitative actions. The city and Columbia did nothing, and so the ballroom continued to fall into even worse shape until in 1989 SHPO stepped aside: saving the Audubon was too expensive now. Nevertheless, throughout the 1980s and into the 90s, preservationists ranging from Columbia professors of architecture and history, members of organizations like the Municipal Art Society, private citizens, and even a handful of politicians continued to argue that the Audubon was a prominent and essential landscape of New York City.

One seemingly unusual group also stepped up to help save the Ballroom: hip-hop artists. Local political rap groups like Brand Nubian and the Poor Righteous Teachers participated in benefit concerts to raise awareness, while the legendary Public Enemy used the Audubon as the background for a music video. While this union may not appear obvious on paper, hip-hop’s political and preservationist history made this a natural team-up. Hip-hop culture was born in the South Bronx, out of the destruction caused by the Cross-Bronx Expressway’s construction and the fires landlords set on their own apartment and tenement buildings. As such, it has been intimately tied to urban decay and “renewal” – or as James Baldwin has called it, “Negro removal” – since its birth. Hip-hop works as both historic and cultural preservation for African Americans and Latinx Americans (and has since worked as such for various international communities). Hip-hop’s sampling keeps old records alive, especially the records the hip-hop artists grew up on, representing a community cultural preservation. However, like Mark Anthony Neal

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points out, they use these preserved cultural products to rearticulate a future. It is natural, then, that hip-hop would be involved with the movement to save the Audubon, both directly and more abstractly. Indeed, hip-hop made its first footing in Harlem through large performances at the Ballroom during the late 1970s.

One question I sought to answer was why the Audubon Ballroom did not seem to receive the same treatment as other places where popular leaders were slain, such as the Ford’s Theater and the Lorraine Motel. Sites of violence have historically faced a complicated time getting preserved than other spaces. Battlefields are often landmarked and operated by the National Park Service, but assassination-sites have been tougher. Perhaps the more personal nature of assassination and murder makes the history a touchier subject for the public. Preservationists struggled to keep Ford’s Theater, Dallas’ Dealey Plaza, and the Lorraine Motel – but preserved these sites were, in the end. Despite the possibility of a squeamish public, the Audubon had a greater argument for preservation beyond its relationship with death. It was both architecturally significant and had become integral to the greater New York City community since its inception. Obviously, Malcolm X was (and still is) a much more controversial figure than Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr., which is a large reason why the Audubon received so little attention. Still, its architectural and community significance seemed reason enough by most preservation standards to save the building.

Not only was the Audubon not preserved in the same vein as other American landmarks, the struggle to save it has not been given adequate academic attention. As mentioned earlier, the New York SHPO determined it was worthy of preservation and listing on the National Register of Historic Place, but it never was. As well, it has
received mostly passing mention in histories of urban development and gentrification, even those focused on New York City. Even in memoirs and biographies of former mayor David Dinkins and former Columbia president Michael Sovern, this struggle is mostly a blip. The Audubon is hardly even mentioned in literature surrounding Malcolm X’s legacy. The best analysis of the Audubon movement is in Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, where she analyzes Public Enemy’s “Night of the Living Baseheads” video and its use of the Audubon as a background. In fact, *Black Noise* was what introduced me to this movement, and I am indebted to Rose’s analysis and attempt to expand on it in the final section of this paper.

Research for this project was slightly hampered by the (as of writing) still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the sources and archives I would normally access for this project – such as Manning Marable, Thomas Lamb, and David Dinkin’s personal papers - are far away in New York City, and travel restrictions make accessing them nearly impossible. Nevertheless, this paper still utilizes a significant amount of resources to make up for this. *The New York Times* and *New York Amsterdam News* provide excellent overviews of the city and university’s plans as well as some community response. Meanwhile, the *Columbia Daily Spectator (CDS)*, the student newspaper of Columbia University, provides detailed accounts of CU’s plans as well as student opinions about the plans, which were overwhelmingly negative. Published oral histories with New York City preservationists like Michael Henry Adams and Laurie Beckelman provide a preservationist lens of the movement to save the Audubon. I also have

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personally interviewed Moises Perez, founder of Alianza Dominicana. However, I must recognize and admit that these source bases are limited: they will not and cannot provide the views of most of the Washington Heights community. The New York Times will only provide the voice of political and movement leaders, the CDS offers primarily a student perspective.

I have relied on numerous methodologies in urban, cultural, and preservationist history in order to overcome some of these limitations. For one, I am indebted to the subaltern theories presented by James Scott and further developed by Robin D. G. Kelley and Eric Avila.\(^8\) The idea of hidden transcripts is relatively common in cultural studies by now, and it provides one avenue of finding the voice of the common New Yorker that newspapers tend to miss. Songs and music videos, public murals, and photography can say quite a lot about what Black and Latinx New Yorkers thought about the Audubon and the attempt to tear it down. I am also influenced by development theory, especially the works of Julie Livingston, Manning Marable, and Arturo Escobar.\(^9\) Although their work is more international in scope, the theoretical underpinnings of their work are nevertheless important for conceiving how and why New York City officials were so willing to tear down the neighborhoods of poorer communities in the name of “progress.”

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What development theorists propose is that capitalism aims for constant growth (usually defined as economic growth). This endless desire for growth, with no defined end, “has produced a world that is highly irrational indeed over the long run, suicidal, self-devouring.”\(^\text{10}\) Capitalism eats up and destroys natural and man-made resources. The hegemonic political structure of the United States (and Western Europe) defines poverty and sets out to “cure” it by any means possible. Washington Heights was a neighborhood in need of growth: to implement this growth, then, it was necessary to demolish neighborhoods and beloved landmarks like the Audubon Ballroom and replace them with what city and university officials determined would bring progress – in this case, a biomedical facility. Essential to this methodological lens is that the people themselves are never consulted. Heights residents argued that this new facility would not bring local jobs, would raise rents on people who could not afford them, and was simply not what they wanted. Their movement was thus not just about saving the Audubon itself, but proving that their communal voices mattered and had power.

The former Audubon Ballroom now represents many things. It represents the promises white hegemonic power structures made and broke with Black and Latinx communities. It represents the possibilities of historic preservation; at the same time, it exposes how those possibilities can be limited by its own practitioners. It shows how universities seemingly committed to progress, multiculturalism, and the betterment of humanity can be the primary contributor to the poisoning and destruction of its own community. Those who fought for it, like Moises Perez, believed that being involved

\(^{10}\) Livingston, \textit{Self-Devouring Growth}, 8.
with the movement was “the greatest honor.”

Nevertheless, they recognize that the current center is hardly a worthy memorial to Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz, or their legacies. They recognize the building could have been saved, or less could have been destroyed, but the (purposeful) inactions by New York City and Columbia University were an inevitable roadblock. As Moises Perez recalled, “it’s so difficult to confront the powerful institutions like that.” Columbia and New York City simply had too much power over the spaces individuals lived in that every struggle was difficult, and any small victory was almost miraculous.

![Figure 1.1. Tax map of upper Manhattan and Bronx. The region containing the Audubon Ballroom is highlighted. New York City Digital Tax Map.](http://gis.nyc.gov/taxmap/map.htm?z=5&p=1001736,246890&a=DTM&c=DTMBasic&f=CONDO_RANGE,LOT_FACE_SMALL,PARK_PROPERTY,BOROUGH)

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11 Perez, interview.
12 Perez, interview.
Figure 1.2. 1930 focused street map showing Audubon Theatre. The Lionel Pincus & Princess Firyal Map Division, New York Public Library Digital Collections.
Chapter 2: In the Heights - Manhattan, Urban Development, and the Audubon Ballroom

This chapter will analyze the history of the two major players – Columbia University and the Audubon Ballroom – and how they came to engage with each other. The section detailing Columbia’s history is not a complete one but instead exclusively focuses on the university’s role within Manhattan’s urban redevelopment and gentrification processes. For decades, Columbia University attempted to buy land and real estate in Harlem and Washington Heights, usually in areas with high Black and Latinx population density. Often justifying themselves with ideas of jobs, boosting local economies, and increasing the value of the communities, Columbia prioritized its own personal goals over the values and security of actual people. These communities then rallied and fought back, sometimes successfully, to stop Columbia’s encroachment.

The history of the Audubon Ballroom, on the other hand, is relatively fuller here. This section looks at the ballroom’s inception by movie mogul William Fox and architect Thomas Lamb, providing architectural description and social context of the ballroom. It then details how the Audubon’s use (and even its name) changed within the context of changing demographics in the Washington Heights area. Special attention is of course given to its relationship with Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. While naturally a historical highlight in the building’s life, the reason for this special attention is mostly due to, first, a greater access to information regarding Malcolm X than
other subjects and, second, because he was the figure whose image later protesters used in their argument to save the ballroom. Equally important, however, is the Audubon’s position as a Latinx community center. Although sources detailing this relationship are sparser than those regarding the OAAU, I attempt to show how important the Audubon Ballroom and San Juan Theatre were to the heavily Dominican and Puerto Rican Washington Heights community.

This chapter is placed within the context of a rapidly changing Washington Heights - changes demographic and physical, forced and chosen. While the Heights have not received quite as much scholarly attention as its more famous, southern neighbor – Harlem – historian Robert Snyder has argued that Washington Heights is the best vantage point “to understand how New York City weathered the passage from the New Deal to the urban crisis to twenty-first-century globalization.”

Washington Heights in the early twentieth century was a neighborhood of moderate-income housing, with “enclaves of affluence.” Its affordable tenements, river view, and distance from the busier downtown attracted many Irish, Italian, Greek – and later, Jewish - New Yorkers. The construction of the IRT subway – New York City’s first – in 1904 and the IND subway made upper Manhattan even more accessible and its population flourished. The Heights’ attractiveness was not exclusive, however, to ethnic whites. Relatively prosperous African Americans in the early century, looking for affordable but nice neighborhoods, began moving up Broadway. The borders between

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14 Snyder, 15.
these communities – Black and white, Upper Harlem and Lower Washington Heights - were frequently “ethnically, racially, and geographically ragged.”

As with essentially every other place in the United States, white Heights residents reacted rather poorly to growing racial diversity in the neighborhood. Even in its earliest days the Heights had “a nasty tendency to keep others out.” In the 1920s and 30s, ethnic whites fought to stop non-whites from moving in and some even turned to rioting. “Newcomers were [seen as] invaders” and the possibility of school integration in the 1960s and 70s only further enraged whites in the area, most of whom were now sequestered in its western region. These ethnic white enclaves were wealthier with better school systems, and their residents hoarded this wealth from people of color. From the 1940s, many whites simply left, and more people of color moved in to fill their void. One New York Times article from 1955 noted that, since 1930, the population of the Heights had grown by 160,000, only 7,500 of whom were white. The “non-white” population had grown to 89,200 while the Puerto Rican population was 104,800, an eighth of the borough’s 1955 population.

As racial borders in the Heights strengthened, the neighborhood grew poorer, though not by any fault of its newest residents. Though indeed the structural racism of American life meant that the new African American and Latinx tenants were of poorer means than most ethnic whites, “most white people had no economic incentive to resist

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16 Snyder, Crossing Broadway, 72.
17 Snyder, 18.
18 Snyder, 69.
integration in the name of preserving property values. Instead, the moved.”\textsuperscript{20} New York City, for its part, also avoided investing in such a multiracial area and when it did, it was usually to displace people of color. Still, Black and Latinx residents fought for their home, petitioning the city, district, anyone to invest in and improve their living conditions. It is within this context that the Audubon rose and fell while the community sparred with Columbia University.

\textbf{Columbia University vs. the World}

Columbia participated in what Joel Schwartz has called “the New York Approach” of urban renewal: “slum” clearance through the power of bulldozers. The New York City Housing Authority and city officials like Robert Moses throughout the twentieth-century used the idea of redevelopment to give “legal authority and large public subsidies to private realtors to uproot low-income people,” assuming that public housing would take them in.\textsuperscript{21} Conservatives and urban liberals alike since the Progressive Era had embraced the New York Approach as a viable means to improve city spaces and lift-up poorer communities through the eventual economic boosts that redevelopment would provide.\textsuperscript{22} And often, this redevelopment was done to find “space for universities and medical centers without the slightest idea of how many graduates or hospital beds the new urban system required.”\textsuperscript{23} The New York Approach was meant to break the “vicious cycle,” as Jane Jacobs called it, of slum areas’ perpetual need for more money by “wiping away slums and their populations, and replacing them with projects intended to produce

\textsuperscript{20} Snyder, \textit{Crossing Broadway}, 48.
\textsuperscript{22} Schwartz, xviii.
\textsuperscript{23} Schwartz, xx.
higher tax yields, or to lure back easier populations with less expensive public requirements. This method fails.” It failed because it dealt with the symptoms, not causes, of poverty and blight. The places most often facing the bulldozer instead of receiving resources tended to have high Black and Latinx populations, which many historians have argued is certainly not a coincidence.

One of Columbia’s most notorious instances of their New York Approach – and the one clearest in mind for later Audubon protesters – was their attempt to convert the public Morningside Park into a private athletics facility. Morningside, as Jane Jacobs described, was a place of natural abundance and pleasure surrounded by good education and healthcare facilities. Yet, in the 1950s, it was slowly becoming a “slum.” City planners quickly got together, “wiped out the most run-down part of the area, and built in its stead a middle-income cooperative project […] and a public housing project.”

“Morningside Heights went downhill even faster.” Development, when done unsympathetically and with only the brute-force of bulldozers, then becomes even worse than neglect. This then, is what the people of Morningside feared when Columbia came to their doors.

Columbia’s 116 block plan was approved by the city in early 1965, with the provision that demolition be kept to a minimum. Still, over 6,700 families were planned to be relocated and residents argued the plans would “destroy the community.”

25 Jacobs, 9.
M. Bradley’s *Harlem vs Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* is the best account of the University’s relationship with the rest of the community and the struggles over Morningside Park. As he points out, Columbia was “an imposing white institution” that tried to use “its affluence, influence, and power to build the structure against the will of the neighboring black community.”

This extraordinarily powerful and nearly all-white institution believed it “had the right to use whatever land the university could afford to buy in order to improve the aesthetics and appeal of the school.” The University promised to work with Harlem and Morningside, but this promise elided the power imbalance between them. They knew that “the neighboring communities, mostly black and Puerto Rican, did not have the power to stop Columbia.”

Jacobs, critical as she usually was of urban development, generally approved of Columbia’s Morningside Plans, saying they were “taking a constructive step by planning sports facilities” for both private and public use.

In April of 1968, community members and Columbia students – mainly the Student’s Afro-American Society (SAS) and Columbia branch of the SDS - held a mass protest to shut down the gymnasium construction. They succeeded, and the gym was never built. Bradley credits the rise of New Left and Black Power movements, especially on campuses across the nation, for forcing Columbia to listen to the community. This type of radical organizing would arise again in the late 1980s as the university threatened the Audubon.

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28 Bradley, 1.
30 Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University*.  

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Columbia had other plans for Harlem, too. In 1965 they published a 73-page study detailing a decade-long plan to “renew” and “integrate” Harlem. Part of this renewal involved revitalizing 125th Street with new stores, easing traffic congestion, and founding a community college. These plans completely fell through. Harlem residents rejected Columbia’s idea of “integration,” which seemed a lot like gentrification and an attempt to wipe out the cultural communities they had built themselves. Some of the projects materialized: Columbia’s Harlem Hospital was built along with some housing projects. The ideas, however, were too lofty for Columbia and too antagonistic to Harlemites.\footnote{Ralph Blumenthal, “HARLEM AWAITS USE OF 1965 PLAN: Renewal Proposal Resulted From Study by Columbia,” \textit{New York Times}, March 23, 1972.} Even though the Morningside Park plan fell through, Columbia continued to buy up land and evict tenants in the area.\footnote{“Malcolm X Anniversary Spurs Audubon Protest,” \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, February 17, 1990.} Columbia professors and deans were frequently on city planning boards, so the university’s influence was felt even indirectly. Following the 1977 city-wide blackout – which resulted in some looting and fires in Harlem – private and public corporations began investing in the borough, assisted by Columbia. The result was rising gentrification and the possibility of lower-income families being able to survive in Harlem was dwindling. Columbia preferred this process to make new student housing easier to build.\footnote{Ted Kenney and Lauren Tarshis, “Building a Rich Man’s Paradise: Harlem, New York’s Most Famous Neighborhood, Is Losing Everything but Its Name,” \textit{Columbia Daily Spectator}, December 6, 1984.}

A History of The Audubon Ballroom

The Audubon Ballroom was commissioned by future theatre and film mogul William Fox in 1912 as his newest “movie palace.” Fox, born Wilhelm Fuchs, was born
to a Jewish family in Tolcsva, Hungary in 1879; they immigrated to the United States within the year, settling in Lower East Side of New York City. In 1900, Fox started his first company and sold it in 1904 to buy a nickelodeon. Throughout the next decade, Fox continued acquiring and building theaters for the newly emerging film industry. In April 1910, Fox, along with three other investors, opened the City Theater at 114 East 14th Street – a theater designed by one of Fox’s future close collaborators, Thomas W. Lamb. By 1912, Fox controlled around sixteen vaudeville houses and theaters.34


Thomas White Lamb was born in 1871 in Dundee, Scotland. His family moved to the United States when he was ten, and he later studied architecture at the Cooper Union Institute. He designed his first building in 1903 - a small clubhouse on the corner of 79th Street and East River - and began working his way up throughout the next decade, building lofts, garages, “even outhouses.” In 1909 he was working on ten major Manhattan works at once, including Fox’s City Theater. Lamb then began specializing in theaters and movie palaces, having designed nine of the thirty in New York City by 1912, the most of any architect by far. His many designs in the 1910s were easily recognizable with their “broad swaths of cream- or white-colored glazed terra cotta with a bit of polychromy and deep dramatic piers, window recesses and other large elements.”

In early 1912, Fox announced the purchase of a lot bounded by Broadway, St. Nicholas Avenue, 165th, and 166th Streets from Franklin Pettit and the construction of a “hippodrome and roof garden.” This new theater would also be designed by Lamb and cost at least $1,000,000. It would feature a hippodrome on the lower floor, with a seating capacity of 2,800, while the top floor would feature a roof garden, assembly, and ballroom. There would also be twenty-eight stores along the sides. Fox intended this new structure to be his “most pretentious” structure, his crown jewel.

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37 Gray.
39 “Million Dollar Hippodrome for Washington Heights.”
Figure 2.2. Star is location of Audubon Ballroom. "The heart of New York Grand Central Terminal." 1918. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. Cartography Associates.

Figure 2.3. Early drawing of the future Audubon's look. From "Million Dollar Hippodrome for Washington Heights," New York Times, January 12, 1912.
Figure 1.3 depicts the planned 165th Street façade of the hippodrome, featuring rectangular columns, a flat roof, few windows, and plenty of perpendicular lines and right angles. The final form of the ballroom, however, featured wider spaces between the columns, which were connected at near the roof line by gray, terra-cotta archways with a teal-blue trim. A decorated teal band ran the length of the building, separating the recessed ground floor from the second floor. The “walls” of the second floor were large, three-over-three pane windows nestled between the columns. Terra-cotta fox heads – likely from the building’s commissioner – rested in both the columns on the second floor and at the peak of the archways connecting these columns. The roofline was also not as flat or flush with the exterior as early plans imagined. Instead, the roof flared out slightly and was punctuated by cornice-tops that jutted above the roof-line at each column. The planned roof garden also never materialized. This exterior style continued along the Broadway-facing-elevation, while the corner of the building was round rather than a solid right-angle. It was on this Broadway-elevation where a metal marquee protruded, showcasing the ballroom’s name in bold, capital, light-and-metal letters. The St. Nicholas Avenue-facing eastern elevation was plain brick; the northern elevation featured backdoors and was located in an alleyway.

Figure 2.4. Christopher Gray, “On Upper Broadway, the Genesis of the Fox Empire,” New York Times, November 22, 1987.
The focal point - approximately three-quarters of the way down 165th, closer to the eastern elevation – remained mostly unchanged from early plans, however. The main entrance is lodged below a semi-circular, lyre archway that rises above the roof. Recessed within this terra-cotta cornice top is a relief of Neptune riding a golden ship and a woman chained to its prow, also made of terra-cotta. The ship and its figurehead plowed through “green scallped waves under a deep blue sky.” Just below this relief, hanging over the entrance, was a large, three-sided marquee that would advertise the week’s showcase.

![Figure 2.5. Close-up of terra-cotta cornice piece. Fred R. Conrad, "Site of Malcolm X Assassination has Uncertain Future," New York Times, September 11, 1985.](image)

The interior was a mix of the classical and the garish. Entering the main entrance, one was greeted by a flight of grand-stairs and an elevator to the main lobby. The lobby was lined with neoclassical Ionic columns, between which were alcoved advertisements topped by decorated cornices and surrounded by hyper-detailed ornamentation. The ground was tiled, eventually with a checkered style. On the ground floor was the Rose Room, which held a capacity of five-hundred-seventy-five people, while the Audubon

Grand Ballroom resided on the top floor. This was reportedly the largest dance floor in New York City, with a capacity of fifteen-hundred people, was lined by booths on both sides, and held a small stage for theatrical performances.\(^{41}\) On the southern end of the ground floor was the auditorium for film viewing. The interior was roughly of an English Renaissance décor-style. The walls were adorned with large murals and paintings, including the Revolutionary War scene, “Washington on the Heights.”\(^{42}\) The walls – at least, those of the ballrooms – were a rather “sickly green color,” and lights hung nakedly from them and the ceilings.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{42}\) Gray, “On Upper Broadway, the Genesis of the Fox Empire.”

\(^{43}\) DeCaro, “EPILOGUE,” 271.
The Washington Heights Hippodrome – now renamed to the Audubon Ballroom, after Audubon Avenue a block to the west, itself named after naturalist and ornithologist John James Audubon – opened on November 27, 1912 to a crowd of sixty-eight-hundred. The rush for this new space was reportedly so great police reenforcements were called.
For the next couple of decades, the Audubon was a home to vaudeville performances and film, with bills changing twice a week. The theater was renamed to the Beverly Hills Theatre in December 1945 but reverted to the Audubon in November 1948. The storerooms on the ground floor also continued to feature various businesses and stores until the ballroom’s eventual closure.

With the profits from the Audubon and his other vaudeville theaters, Fox started buying films outright to distribute in 1914. On February 1, 1915, he founded the Fox Film Company with the assistance of a handful of other New Jersey investors. Now based in New Jersey, Fox and his company began distributing films and leasing film studios, expanding near-exponentially over the next decade. Throughout 1925 and 1926, Fox Film purchased the rights to the work of inventors Freeman Harrison Owens, Theodore Case, and the German company Tri-Ergon to create the new Movietone sound-on-film system, which allowed sound – mainly music – to be played synchronously with the picture. 1927’s *Sunrise*, directed by F. W. Murnau and distributed by Fox, was among the

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44 Gray, “On Upper Broadway, the Genesis of the Fox Empire.”
first films to feature synchronized score and sound effects. Fox Movietone News started in 1928 and was one of the most dominant newsreel series in the United States for decades.

Fox himself, however, began to suffer personally, even as his film empire took off. He attempted to purchase holdings in rival Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1929, but was sued by the Justice Department for violating federal antitrust laws. At the same time, he was seriously injured in a car accident and his fortune was nearly entirely wiped out in October with the stock-market crash. He lost control of Fox Film in 1930 and began a seven-year battle against bankruptcy. He attempted to bribe his bankruptcy judge in 1936, committed perjury, and served a five month jail sentence. He died in 1952.  

Thomas Lamb, however, continued to lead a long and distinguished architectural career. He received wide, international acclaim throughout his architectural career, designing iconic theaters and stadiums in the United States, including Madison Square Garden, Harlem’s Golden Gate Ballroom, and the Regent Theatre. He did not limit himself to theaters, either – Lamb also designed apartments that dotted the Manhattan streets. Overall, Lamb designed somewhere from forty-eight to fifty-six of Manhattan’s theaters and approximately three-hundred structures worldwide – including theaters in the Soviet Union, Egypt, Australia, Canada, and India. "Thomas W. Lamb, 71, A Noted Architect."

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has noted that Lamb’s terra-cotta designs have stood the test of time remarkably well, especially compared to his peers.\textsuperscript{49} Lamb passed at age 71 on February 27, 1942.

As the demographics of Washington Heights changed, so, too, did the name, use, and interpretation of the Audubon Ballroom. The Audubon became more than a movie palace and vaudeville theatre, it was a social center for many ethnic and racial communities. In the late 1930s, the ballroom became a center of Jewish community. European Jews fled the Third Reich and many settled in upper Manhattan. One rough count in 1930 estimated that three-eighths of Washington Heights was Jewish and by 1940 this proportion was even higher, the majority of which were clustered around Broadway and 158\textsuperscript{th}, just south of the Audubon.\textsuperscript{50} Rabbi Max Koppel opened the immigrant congregation Emes Wosedek and held Jewish holiday services at the Audubon. This same congregation held choir concerts in its ballrooms, whose audiences numbered in the hundreds.\textsuperscript{51} On the ground floor was a small synagogue, one that continued to meet during the Malcolm X days and even until the city takeover.\textsuperscript{52} As diverse activities as weddings, dances, “jitterbugging contests,” transit workers’ union meetings, social club meetings, and even boxing matches were held in its ballrooms, especially the Audubon Grand, throughout the 1950s and 60s.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{49} Gray, “An Architect for Stage and Screen.”
\textsuperscript{50} Snyder, \textit{Crossing Broadway}, 24, 28.

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In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, the Audubon reflected Washington Heights’ growing African American and Latinx population. After World War II, the Heights – as with much of New York City – became more of “a multiracial metropolis, renewed by African Americans from the south, by Puerto Ricans,” and other immigrants from Latin American and the Caribbean, especially the Dominican Republic. Dominicans especially, as with Jewish immigrants before them, found home in this neighborhood after escaping a murderous dictator in Rafael Trujillo. In the three decades following World War II, New York City’s Black population tripled and the Puerto Rican population grew almost ten-times over. Many of them were looking for a better home and “Washington Heights was one of the places with the solid housing stock and neighborhood amenities that people

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54 Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 4.
The Heights were often divided into small, ethnic enclaves, sometimes no bigger than a block, with broad racial divisions formed by Broadway Avenue. But, as Robert Snyder has pointed out, when threatened, these enclaves were never hesitant to band together as a singular, Washington Heights neighborhood.

These new Black and Latinx residents clustered around the Audubon, and the ballroom reflected these changes. In April 1949, the Audubon Theatre was purchased by Lou Walters, an operator in the “Latin Quarter” of New York. Its name changed name again in May 1949, this time to the New San Juan Theatre - later just the San Juan Theatre. It now showcased Spanish language vaudeville and American-made films dubbed in Spanish. One report noted that Spanish vaudeville had “become a fabulous operation in New York,” both with the growing Hispanic population and even local whites. The movie theater would remain as the San Juan for its duration, continuing to

![Figure 2.11. View of the new San Juan marquee sign on 165th Street façade. June 1, 1954. New York City Housing Authority Collection, LaGuardia & Wagner Archives.](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3069/photos/225093)

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55 Snyder, 49–50.
show Spanish films to the local Puerto Rican and Dominican population. The building itself remained as the Audubon.

In June of 1964, the Audubon Ballroom was united with the figure it would forever after be directly linked to: Malcolm X. In the early 1960s, the infamous Nation of Islam minister was growing increasingly estranged from the religion while his own profile grew bigger. Malcolm himself never wanted to be more famous than the Nation and remained loyal to it and Elijah Muhammad the entire time. Muhammad, however, wanted Malcolm gone for a number of reasons. He was worried that Malcolm, with his fame, was trying to replace him. Malcolm was also growing increasingly political, speaking on human rights and Black liberation struggles in the United States and worldwide; speaking about politics, however, was not allowed by the Nation. The main issue, however, was that Malcolm had been made aware of Elijah Muhammad’s many affairs with NoI secretaries, most of which resulted in children. Malcolm’s faith had been shaken and Muhammad grew increasingly paranoid. The final straw came in December.

After a speech, Malcolm answered a question regarding the recent assassination of president John F. Kennedy: believing it to be just further proof of white America’s inherent violence, he stated the assassination was an example of “chickens coming home to roost.” Following mass public outcry, and looking for any excuse to get rid of him, Elijah Muhammad had Malcolm silenced and suspended from the Nation of Islam. Even though he still did not believe he was permanently expelled from the organization, Malcolm looked for new ways to organize. On March 16, 1964, he founded and legally incorporating the Muslim Mosque, Inc. (MMI) whose stated goal was to convince
African Americans they had to “control the politics in his own residential areas by voting … and investing in the businesses within the Negro areas.”\footnote{Quoted in Manning Marable, \textit{Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention} (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 299.}

By April 1964, Malcolm and the NoI had formally split, and Malcolm was on his own. Having grown increasingly interested in more orthodox Islam, he contacted Dr. Mahmoud Shawarbi, a Muslim professor he had become acquainted with in late 1960, who convinced Malcolm to actually read the Qur’an and take the pilgrimage to Mecca. He took the opportunity to tour African and Middle Eastern nations, many newly independent after decades of European colonialization, to gain a better connection with and understanding of the international Black and Muslim world. On April 13 he left for Cairo, visiting Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, and Algeria over the next couple months. As Manning Marable has noted, this trip did not awaken some racial egalitarianism within Malcolm that had never existed, but instead strengthened his commitments to and beliefs in Pan-Africanism, orthodox Islam, anti-colonialism, and multiracial human rights – ideas he had been grappling with long before he parted with the Nation of Islam.\footnote{Marable, 297–320.} Following his return, Malcolm – inspired by the Organisation of African Unity that had impressed him on his sojourn and wanting a more secular organization to go along with the MMI – announced the formation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) on June 28, 1964, at the Audubon Ballroom.

The OAAU met Sunday evenings at the Audubon, its members seated at five-hundred wooden folding chairs in front of the small stage of the Grand Ballroom. These
meetings were apparently often informal, “chat[ing] and kid[ding] with [his class] for a while and then gets on with the lessons.”

[what did he speak about] He used these Sunday nights “to try to wake Harlem,” to “use a negative attack to produce a positive goal.” Former Nation followers confronted him there, saying he changed. “I haven’t changed. I just see things on a broader scale,” he would respond.

Beyond his demand for self-defense, which took on an even greater urgency in his post-Nation life, he promised to work on voter registration across the nation. He was more open to the demonstrations organized by SNCC and SCLC, although on his own terms. He began to stress cooperation: “If we are going into the ring, our right fist does not have to become our left fist, but we must use a common head.”

Malcolm stated that the OAAU was “pro-Harlem, we’re pro-ourselves.” “The community of Harlem,” he argued in one speech at the Audubon, “should be controlled by those of us who live in Harlem. Not by somebody sitting down in Gracie Mansion.”

This idea of community politics would return in force during the fight over the Audubon itself.

Malik el-Shabazz, as Malcolm was now known, would not live to oversee the growth of the OAAU. This story is a well-known one by now. On February 21, 1965, only two weeks after a previous assault on his life – when the Nation of Islam had firebombed his home, destroying much of it and nearly killing his children – he took the

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60 Nadle.

61 Nadle.

stage of the Audubon for a relatively average OAAU meeting. In the week since the firebombing, Malcolm had increased his rhetorical attacks on the NOI, comparing their tactics to the Ku Klux Klan and saying Elijah Muhammad was “more interested in girls” than change or religion. When Malcolm arrived at the Audubon at midday on the 21st, he seemed “harried” and lashed out at his peers, later apologizing. Following an address by Benjamin 2X, Malcolm took the stage at nearly 3 p.m. sharp to speak to a rather full crowd, one including Betty and their children. Following a brief applause and traditional Islamic greeting – “As-salaam alaikum” with the crowd responding “Walaikum salaam” – he noted a struggle happening about six rows back from the stage. Malcolm tried to call some form of order: “Hold it! Hold it!” his last words before being cut off by a shotgun blast by Nation member Talmadge Hayer. He and Leon X Davis shot Malcolm multiple times before fleeing – Davis escaped but Hayer was grabbed by the crowd and beaten. The gunshots were heard by a group of older Jewish men praying in the store-front synagogue and the owner of the San Juan Theater (who attributed the sounds to a movie that was playing at the time). Ambulances were immediately called but, although the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital was only just across Broadway, one never arrived. OAAU and Muslim Mosque, Inc., members, tired for waiting for help, left to bring their own hospital gurney. They, along with some policemen who had finally shown up, took the likely-already-dead Malcolm to Columbia Presbyterian’s emergency room, where he was pronounced dead. Later that night, the scheduled George Washington Birthday Party

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went on as scheduled in the Grand Ballroom, Malcolm’s blood only barely cleaned off the floor. In his quintessential biography of Malcolm X, Manning Marable all-but-confirmed one aspect of the assassination that his followers had long suspected: interference and suspicious absence from the police and federal agencies. The regular police presence in front of the Audubon was gone on the 21st, which police chief Peter Goldman bizarrely attributed to a request from Malcolm’s own party. Police who had been absent during Malcolm’s murder suddenly appeared to protect Hayer. Even during the shooting they apparently were not in any sort of rush, “Not one of them had his gun out!” And there was almost certainly no chance the FBI did not know about the plans before hand: as Malcolm noted a week before his death, “There is no conversation that takes place in the Black Muslim movement that the city police don’t know about, because they have policemen in there. They don’t let Black people form anything without some policemen in there.” This, along with the slow ambulance response time, only deepened African American distrust of city governments and police, a feeling that informed the later struggle against the Audubon’s demolition.

The stage and podium where he stood remained. The bullet holes in the wall stayed, “the engravings of violent men that too many have since exploited in order to buttress their warped accounts of the man called Malcolm X.” In the ensuing decades, the faces of the Audubon would be covered by graffiti and street-art, much of it in

65 Marable, Malcolm X, 432–44.
66 el-Shabazz, “There's A Worldwide Revolution Going On.”
memorial to Malcolm. The terra-cotta centerpiece above the main entrance was chipped and scuffed, and the woman’s right arm had fallen off. In many ways, the “degradation” of the ballroom that led to its planned destruction was instead a living memory of Malcolm’s final moments. And just as the city, its police and ambulances, abandoned its “red-headed step-child” on the doorstep of the ballroom, so too did it abandon this site.

New York City took ownership of the ballroom in 1967 due to back taxes, but it ran essentially the same as before. The San Juan Theatre continued to showcase popular Latin American and Spanish-language films, becoming a landmark of the local Latinx community. It became a piazza – a community center – for the Manhattan Puerto Rican and Dominican communities and served a similar purpose as Puerto Rican casitas, literally “little houses” that hosted celebrations and community get-togethers.

Figure 2.12. Bullet holes on podium and stage from Malcolm X’s assassination, which remained until the Audubon's destruction. New York Daily News.

New York City took ownership of the ballroom in 1967 due to back taxes, but it ran essentially the same as before. The San Juan Theatre continued to showcase popular Latin American and Spanish-language films, becoming a landmark of the local Latinx community. It became a piazza – a community center – for the Manhattan Puerto Rican and Dominican communities and served a similar purpose as Puerto Rican casitas, literally “little houses” that hosted celebrations and community get-togethers.

68 Gray, “On Upper Broadway, the Genesis of the Fox Empire.”
Aponte-Pares notes how piazzas and “casitas built in New York […] are generally located in neighborhoods that witnessed massive population displacement over the past three decades and now suffer from extreme poverty,” true for the Audubon and the surrounding Washington Heights area.\textsuperscript{71} Latinx Americans used the San Juan for both “political rallies and artistic presentations.”\textsuperscript{72} The city, however, shut down the theatre in 1980. The ballroom was now quickly deteriorating and its alley-walls and some doorways were covered by graffiti. It was not, however, empty. The store-front synagogue, offices and storage for the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development, various stores, and even an Hispanic school all continued to operate within the Audubon’s (rapidly decaying) walls.

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Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Melnick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Perez, interview.
\textsuperscript{71} Aponte-Pares, “Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios: Preserving Contemporary Urban Landscapes,” 95.
\textsuperscript{72} Aponte-Pares, 109.
Chapter 3: Hip-Hop’s Concrete Roots

“The gift of life really means a lot / And in the ghetto your life is all you got / So you take to the streets, tryin’ to exist / In the trash and slime of a world like this / What you watch, on TV / Tells you what life is supposed to be / But when you look outside the only thing you see / Is the poverty stricken, reality”


When legendary rap squad Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released “The Message” in 1982 and “New York New York” in 1983, critics hailed it as the beginning of political rap. Scholars and rap aficionados since have similarly claimed that this was rap’s first political moment. In these songs, Bronx MC Melvin “Melle Mel” Glover – along with Edward “Duke Bootee” Fletcher – describes the bleak and dismal scene of life in New York City’s poorer areas. Melle Mel, born 1961, thus protests the poor conditions that he identifies with his childhood home of the Bronx. At the same time, he articulates an idea well developed by scholars, activists, and hip-hop musicians alike. City government, banks, real estate organizations, and mainstream white actions purposefully segregated urban areas, and New York City boroughs were especially divided by race.

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74 Both MC and Emcee will be used interchangeably in this essay. Ed Fletcher is a musician and rapper originally from New Jersey. As Duke Bootee, he wrote and rapped on most of “The Message,” “New York, New York,” and “The Message II.” Melle Mel wrote the parts he rapped, however.
The white political and cultural hegemony that created this separated geography often left the region’s African American and Latinx residents behind. Although popular thought describes these songs as hip-hop’s first political acts, the songs are instead the culmination of nearly a decade of cultural protest and organizing in the Bronx, Harlem, Washington Heights, and Brooklyn.

The various people of color – here defined as Black and Hispanic residents – who lived in the many New York boroughs long protested their conditions and the methods that created ghettos. In the early 1970s, a multi-racial and multimedia hip-hop culture emerged from these ghettos as the most dominant voice of protest. Simultaneously criticizing the conditions that created their segregated neighborhoods and claiming the “ghetto” as their own, hip-hop artists – graffiti artists, dancers, DJs, and MCs alike – used the genre to explicitly address and shape space and place. Specifically, they were responding to urban planning projects that turned the South Bronx – considered the birthplace of hip-hop – into the poor neighborhood it was known as. Black and Latinx people living in other New York boroughs that had suffered similar fates – boroughs like

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75 Hispanic and Latinx are both used in this paper. When referring to the “ghetto” or similar terms, I refer to the term as defined by Murray Forman: they are indeed boroughs, neighborhoods, or even single streets within large cities that tend to be underdeveloped and economically poor. Like the South Bronx, American ghettos or inner cities are primarily defined via this combination of external stereotypes and internal definitions. From the outside perspectives, they are economically deprived, generally non-white, urban spaces – regardless of actual demographics or economic or job situations of the inhabitants – ripe for capitalist exploitation. Internally, residents recognize their social and economic situations, but note that this does not make the “ghetto” any less of a home, that they work as hard (and harder) than anyone else, and they are quick to point out that they did not create their conditions. Murray Forman, The ’Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 41.
Harlem, Washington Heights, and Brooklyn – quickly latched on to hip-hop and its message.

This chapter will specifically look at how hip-hop was used as a response to the various urban renewal projects by New York City and Columbia University. Hip-hop – its music, art, and movement – was not only inherently political, it was a reclamation of first the Bronx and, later, all of New York City. Although most scholars argue that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s 1982 record “The Message” was the first time rap was political, it was rather the culmination of a decade of community organizing and identity forming. As Tricia Rose points out, in America the white cultural and political hegemony considered large public gatherings of African- and Hispanic-Americans threatening, and rap concerts and parties were no different. Therefore, massive gatherings were inherently political and every aspect of hip-hop was meant to be public. Judith Butler argues that “the assembly is already speaking before it utters any words, that by coming together it is already an enactment of popular will,” with the goal here being a united Bronx that responded to its residents’ needs. In her documentary, Decade of Fire, Vivian Vasquez Irizarry noted, “My generation knew we would have to recreate the world ourselves. Some of us were inventing hip-hop in South Bronx basements [...] that spirit became contagious. Stay, fight, build.” Historian Kevin Powell has noted how “the culture and the energy that came from that was very improvisational energy, a very

78 Vivian Vazquez Irizarry and Gretchen Hildebran, Decade of Fire, Documentary (Public Broadcasting System, 2019).
sort of reclaiming energy [...] It was a willed response to systematic violence in the community.”

Hip-hop culture, in short, emerged in the 1970s as a major voice of marginalized urban people speaking against the forced modernization imposed on them by the white hegemonic forces of City politics and Columbia real estate. It was an attempt to preserve Black and Latinx cultures and urban spaces. This chapter thus establishes hip-hop’s role in the Audubon debates. Both the Audubon Ballroom and hip-hop artists – especially rap groups like Public Enemy and Brand Nubian – were the most direct descendants of Malcolm X’s legacy in the 1980s and 90s.

Rap’s Earliest Days

It is difficult to say that hip-hop was “born” in one single moment. The traditional account is it was born on August 11, 1973, at a party hosted by Bronx local Cindy Campbell. She rented out her apartment building’s recreation room, brought drinks, and had her brother, Clive, DJ. Clive Campbell had been DJing for three years under the name DJ Kool Herc. Typically, he performed in a Jamaican dancehall style (his family being from the island), one that performed well in Brooklyn. The Bronx was different: they did not want dancehall or disco. Instead, he played the danciest, fastest parts of classic funk records like James Brown’s “Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose” and the Incredible Bongo Band’s “Bongo Rock.” He performed this style at his sister’s party, which was later considered the first hip-hop concert.

This event did indeed happen. But it is reductive to claim that this sole moment is when all of hip-hop was created. Certainly, it was the first hip-hop concert. But hip-hop

follows the Nietzschean and Foucauldian idea of emergence: it “is always produced through a particular stage of forces. [...] no one is responsible for an emergence.”\(^{80}\) Pete DJ Jones, one of hip-hop’s earliest DJs, remarked that “Hip-Hop emerged. If you noticed, I did not say founded, invented, discovered or created.”\(^{81}\) To seek the pure origin of hip-hop, the singular moment when it was truly “invented,” “makes us believe that what stands at the beginning of all things is also what is most valuable and essential.”\(^{82}\) Indeed, hip-hop still struggles with an idea of purity, of what is “real rap.” This obscures how hip-hop evolved out of a swirl of cultural, political, and socioeconomic events and then continued to change throughout the decade of its origin.

Like the Heights, the Bronx in the early twentieth century offered quality housing and the chance for upward mobility. The borough thus attracted a high amount of immigrants, growing faster than any other borough in New York City. It quickly became a cultural center, home to the New York Yankees, the Bronx Zoo, and Fordham University. By the 1960s, the Bronx had shifted from two-thirds white to a heavy majority of African Americans and Hispanics, mostly Puerto Ricans. Housing in the Bronx, especially the South Bronx, was cheaper than other areas, and “living conditions in the Bronx [were] better on the whole for Negroes than in Manhattan and Brooklyn.”\(^{83}\)

\(^{83}\) “Living Conditions Are Better For Negroes In The Bronx: Study of Conditions Reveals Growth of Negro Population In Bronx Area and Improved Living Conditions--Families of Moderate Means Benefactors,” The Pittsburgh Courier, September 14, 1940.
As the century progressed, however, poverty in the Bronx grew and, with it, crime. The increasing African American and Puerto Rican populations were blamed -- usually by police and wealthier whites who left the Bronx -- for the increasing crime and the massive wave of fires that destroyed much of the community in the 1970s.  

This bad reputation, however, was mainly the result of urban renewal projects, especially those by city planner Robert Moses. The construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the 1950s and 60s, for example, created a hard boundary for the South Bronx and closed it off from the rest of the city. From the outset it was clear that this Expressway would damage rather than serve the Bronx community. Moses promised that few families would be displaced by the Cross Bronx and other Expressways, and that those who were would be compensated; reality proved different. Over 1,500 families were forced to leave their homes, and thousands more left to escape the fumes and sounds of construction. Property values plummeted and young Black and Latinx families – priced out of other boroughs – moved in. The apartments and tenements these people of color moved into were very old and decaying. Their landlords – struggling from the low property values and not frankly caring about people of color one way or another – not even refused to upgrade the buildings but even began burning them down. At least 40 percent, and possibly up to 80 percent, of residential buildings in the South Bronx burned

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down in the 1970s at the same time New York City began closing fire departments in the borough.\(^{87}\)

Alongside these fires, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements underwent a radical transition. The marches that had characterized the 1960s slowly fell out of vogue, replaced with greater Black access to politics. The 1970s also saw a growth in the culturally reactionary New Right, “post-racial” politics, and deindustrialization that left many major urban centers floundering. A void for more localized social organization and leadership opened, organizations that could offer protection, empowerment, and even jobs. In the late 1960s, gangs appeared to fill that gap. Gangs -- or cliques or organizations as many preferred to be called -- organized communities, offering protection and comradery to residents of different parts of the Bronx. They offered implicit, and in many cases explicit, critiques of the white capitalist hegemony that had changed and destroyed the borough.

There were any number of reasons why young residents of the South Bronx joined gangs. Mainly, it was a way to cope with the poor quality of life surrounding them. The residents of the Bronx were cognizant of the way their neighborhoods had been ignored by the city planners once whites fled during the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Marvin “Hollywood” Harper of the Savage Skulls proclaimed, “we got to

live in this district. The whiteys don’t come down here and live in the fucked-up houses.
The whiteys don’t come down here and have all the fucked-up no heat in the fucking
winter time, you understand? We do, jack, so therefore we got to make it a better place to live.”

On the other hand, as Ewoodzie notes, “If gang life was a negative marker of
urban decay for some, it was a positive institution for those who participated. For
thousands of young men and women, these clubs were an important part of life and often
formed their primary social identity.” Former gang members reminisced how these
groups were almost like families and even respected in communities. As Afrika
Bambaataa, Black Spades leader and later a hip-hop godfather, stated, “‘We had the
saying: ‘This is not a gang. We are family.’” Ben Buxton, founder of the Savage
Nomads, remembered how “those [people who lived in the neighborhoods where gangs
were located] that knew us, that we had to interact with, they loved us.”

But by the end of 1971, gang influence drastically fell in the Bronx – at least for a
time. On December 10, Cornell “Black Benjie” Benjamin, vice-president and peacemaker
of the Ghetto Brothers, was killed while trying to mediate a gang dispute in Hunts Point.
Benjamin – an Afro-Puerto Rican -- was popular and respected among all the other

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90 Lucky Strike: “Being in the Savage Skulls was more of a unity thing, the second family
that I never had.” Bom5: “when you grow up in a neighborhood that’s all gangs, you got
to join.” Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y’all: The Experience Music Project
92 Chalfant and Fecher, *Flyin’ Cut Sleeves*. 
gangs. Although the Ghetto Brothers initially announced vengeance, the leaders decided on a meeting with the presidents and warlords of the other major gangs. Meeting December 8 at the Boys Club on Hoe Avenue in the Bronx, members of the Ghetto Brothers, Black Spades, Savage Skulls, Turbans, Seven Immortals, Latin Kings, Young Saigons, and many more decided on a truce, one that lasted until the 1980s. Although not a complete peace, it at least established a non-violent way for gangs to deal with conflicts.

With peace relatively established, a new vacuum appeared. Gangs did not disappear, nor did crime, but the real legacy of the Hoe Avenue meeting was the influence they lost. As gangs retreated from prominence, some of their old neighborhood boundaries blurred. Hip-hop’s emergence thus accomplished two things. First, major hip-hop figures – especially DJs – became the new community leaders. Second, graffiti writers and hip-hop musicians overcame gang boundaries to create a sense of a greater Bronx community identity.

“The borough’s poverty and chaos provided the social context for hiphop’s creation. The children of those who remained in the South Bronx were among the poorest of the poor. Although few material resources were available to them, they had an

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abundance of symbolic resources.” It is no coincidence that, as geographer Joshua Jelly-Schapiro discovered, most of hip-hop’s most important moments in the 1970s were at the same locations as the most devastating fires during the same decade (Figure 4). All the previously mentioned cultural and economic features of the Bronx swirled together to create a more aggressive, high-energy culture.

Gangs’ territorial ideas did remain, but in a much more fluid way. DJs especially had their own territories where they played. A greater sense of neighborhood identity – a shared sense of the Bronx – trumped territorial differences. As Melle Mel stated, “All we cared about was love from the Bronx.” Later in hip-hop’s life, one identified through their borough or city or even national region. Battles were also a prominent feature of hip-hop. This time, however, battles were fought through their respective art styles, rather than violence.

Graffiti represents the clearest territorial transition from gang territories to hip-hop’s cross-borough unity, while being an explicitly claiming of public space. Writers wanted to spread their art or even just their name throughout the city. While one can interpret this as a selfish or individualistic act, graffiti still encouraged public engagement. Not only did tags claim property, people would gather on the streets to admire the latest masterpieces. “Many graffiti writers believe that they are beautifying

95 Ewoodzie, Break Beats in the Bronx, 31.
98 David Henkin also explores the idea of anonymous crowds building a cohesive identity through shared experiences of public art. David M. Henkin, City Reading: Written Words
the city with their train painting and consider their writing a public service. [...] graffiti writers as a community are more remarkable for their difference.”

Richard Goldstein, writing in *New York Magazine* in the first real support of taggers, stated “It may be that the kids who write graffiti are the healthiest and most assertive people in their neighborhoods.”

Graffiti masterpieces could even be explicitly political, such as with Lee Quinones’ “Earth Is Hell – Heaven Is Life,” pictured in Figure 2.1. The eventual city crackdown on graffiti meant that taggers’ goals had worked: as Metropolitan Transportation Authority Chairman Richard Ravitch admitted, “it is a symbol that we have lost control.”

Not only was tagging a public act of property reclamation, graffiti was a communal space. Writers wanted to meet other writers when they saw each other’s work on the street or subway. They wanted to learn from each other and pass on their own skills. And in fact, many taggers took on their own proteges or formed their own crews.

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*Figure 3.1. Lee Quinones’ "Earth Is Hell," still from Stations of the Elevated.*


Craig Castleman uses Gregory Snyder’s idea of “micro-social interactions” to explain the spread of graffiti. In short, writers passed their skills and ideas on to their proteges who spread those ideas to their proteges. Writers would also express their enjoyment or displeasure of others’ works with their own tags. This created a democratic form of community building in the graffiti world, where the style evolved through the collective efforts of taggers throughout the Bronx.102

It took time for DJs to establish themselves as the new leaders. Initially, DJs like Herc had no respect in the neighborhood. Mainly, it was because “cats had just came out of the gang era so nobody could go in other guys neighborhood and play music and all of that because they treated you like dirt.” It was only once they started making money that DJs established themselves. “We [Coke la Rock and DJ Kool Herc] made it fashionable for cats to hold their heads up, and say you know what I do, I play music. See because the same money we start making off playing music was the same money cats I knew were getting […] Our first party together Herc and I made $8000. That’s when I knew right then through the law of average if I leave the drugs alone and get into this here I could settle for at least $5000 a week.”103 By the mid-1970s, DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, Grandwizzard Theodore, and many others had established

themselves as the new community leaders. People around the Bronx demanded these DJs throw more parties, each bigger than the last.

Bronx DJs distinguished themselves from others around the city by their style. DJs in Harlem and Brooklyn were playing public concerts at the same time as in the Bronx, but they were more disco-oriented. According to Grandwizard Theodore, “Pete [DJ Jones] only played Disco music. You got a lot of people that say they was into Hip Hop, but Pete played Disco music. [DJ] Hollywood played Disco music.”104 Although Hollywood and Lovebug Starski are often credited as founders of hip-hop and rapping – make no mistake, they were instrumental – Bronx hip-hoppers argued that Harlem and Brooklyn DJs were playing the same old music while the Bronx that was doing something new. “After awhile we got tired of hearing the Hustle and disco records – we wanted that funk.”105 As well, most of the rhymes these others used were basic and much closer to the traditional radio DJ toasting or scatting. “Those Disco Djs they always used nursery rhymes mixed up with their own stuff. When you heard us there would be nothing familiar that we said unless you heard us say it before.”106 Finally, hip-hop styles were not welcome outside the Bronx. “When we tried to get into Hollywood’s parties, they would be like, ‘Oh no! You have to have on suit jackets and shoes’ and all that. Sometimes we would get into the party and some of the guys would start b-boying and they would turn the music off and say, ‘Oh we don’t do that in here.’”107

104 Theodore, interview.
105 Afrika Bambaataa, Fricke and Ahearn, Yes Yes Y’all, 45.
107 Theodore, interview.
predominately Black and Hispanic youth of the South Bronx, Manhattan was simply too bourgeois, and so was its music – disco. ¹⁰⁸

Unlike other boroughs and cities, the Bronx had no media being made tailored for it. The borough had been cordoned off, sequestered by the CBE and left to rot by the city administration. As such, Bronx youth had to make their own culture, one defined by their specific experiences from living in the Bronx. ¹⁰⁹ This meant a style of high-energy, from the music to the dancing, even to the wildstyle graffiti developed in the area. “Following the DJ’s cardinal rule—that such energy should be encouraged—[Herc] looked for ways to highlight these particular segments of the songs. ‘Forget melody, chorus, songs—it was all about the groove, building it, keeping it going.’” ¹¹⁰

One of the more prominent aspects of the Bronx’s new culture was its unique form of dancing, known as breaking and b-boying. An intense, jerky form of dance, it derived from the breakbeats (hence the name) of soul and funk records. ¹¹¹ Done by Black and Puerto Rican Bronxites alike, “breaking [was] a public arena for the flamboyant triumph of virility, wit, and skill.” ¹¹² Public street dancing would also have been familiar

¹⁰⁹ “See, in the South Bronx we really had nothing to do [...] everything we did was like something just to make a little bit of excitement in the area.” Kool DJ AJ, Fricke and Ahearn, Yes Yes Y’all, 35.
¹¹⁰ Ewoodzie, Break Beats in the Bronx, 40.
¹¹¹ A breakbeat is a section of a song where the lead instruments drop out and the rhythm section – the drums and sometimes the bass – play a beat. At a club, the breakbeats often led to the highest energy levels from the crowds. Hip-hop music is based on a looped sample of these breakbeats. “Going into your footwork, how you went into your freeze, and how you came out of your freeze.” Jorge “Fabel” Pabon, B-boy, Fricke and Ahearn, Yes Yes Y’all, 12.
to Bronx residents, as people would often party around local street drummers. Like the music, this form of dancing was distinct from the disco-dancing in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{113}

Gang kids did often transition to hip-hop. Duke Bootee stated that, “You have to get the kids with street skills, but that have a more cultured background. See many of these kids were gonna be jailbirds anyway! They come from jailbird families. For many of them rap is just an interlude between them and jail.”\textsuperscript{114} Coke La Rock, Kool Herc’s partner and one of the first Emcees, was formerly a drug dealer, and left the game in 1978 to rejoin gangs.\textsuperscript{115} Most famously, Afrika Bambaataa turned a faction of the Black Spades into the Zulu Nation, a hip-hop oriented organization that promoted international peace.

DJ$s$, as they became the new community leaders of the Bronx, had an essential role in organizing the borough. By performing at public recreational facilities, high schools, and parks, DJ$s$ and their block parties became the main channel of community

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\textsuperscript{113} Ewoodzie, \textit{Break Beats in the Bronx}, 41.
\textsuperscript{115} Coke La Rock, interview.
spirit in the 1970s. Herc noted how he mainly performed because people throughout the Bronx kept stopping him on the street begging him to throw more parties.\footnote{DJ Kool Herc, interview, September 1988.} No one involved in the early hip-hop scene had any idea that it would become an international phenomenon, people were just looking for something positive and get together.

Emceeing was the last aspect of hip-hop to emerge, yet it was also not “new.” It evolved out of both street “toasting” and older radio and party DJs talking over the music. Before 1975 “they didn't have a distinction between who was the DJ and who was the Emcee, because all the DJs Emceed.”\footnote{Kid Creole, interview.} In the early 1970s, DJs like Kool Herc brought others on-stage to hype up the crowd and they occasionally would throw out some basic couplet rhymes. Keith “Cowboy” Wiggins, a member of Grandmaster Flash’s Furious Five, is credited as the first to actually rhyme full verses on-time with the DJ’s beat around 1978.\footnote{Cowboy also invented the term “hip-hop” in 1978 at a send-off party of one of his friends. Previously the genre had just been known as “jamming.” Kid Creole; Rahiem, interview by JayQuan, 2005, http://thafoundation.com/cowboy.htm.} He and Melle Mel – also of the Furious Five – expanded the idea of Emceeing, influencing nearly every other MC from the Bronx in that time.

Like DJs, MCs were predominately Black and male. Hispanic MCs certainly existed but were not given the same prominence as African American ones. The first Puerto Ricans to rock the mic were a duo called Tom and Jerry, but there is almost no other information about them available. The prominence of Black DJs and MCs, and the exclusion of Latinx people in the early days of rap records, has led to a belief that hip-hop is solely an African American cultural creation. Nevertheless, Puerto Ricans and other
Hispanic people were instrumental in hip-hop’s formation, and their support as audience members was similarly critical.\textsuperscript{119}

Emcees especially believed in the art of performance or working a unified crowd. This is the main distinction between the original emcees and rappers in the recorded era, beginning in 1980. According to Melle Mel, an MC could work the crowd and mold their feelings, just like a DJ or civic leader. A rapper, on the other hand, just performs. Most hip-hop artists from the 1980s on were just rappers.\textsuperscript{120} Rapper Dynamite, for example, noted how “our show was more like a play than a rap concert” and “Cowboy [childhood friend, member of the Furious 5, and one of the original MCs] had a knack for making a crowd eat out of the palm of his hand. […] He could make them do anything.”\textsuperscript{121} Similarly, “in terms of rap I always thought that the street aspect of Hip Hop was in conflict with the commercial aspect. What we saw with Rappers Delight was the defining moment when people who weren’t part of the original culture became stars.”\textsuperscript{122} Rapping in this era also involved shouting out people in the crowd, or people and places they knew. By shouting out people and their block, MCs created a sense of shared community

\textsuperscript{120} Melle Mel, interview by JayQuan, April 3, 2005, http://thafoundation.com/melint2.htm.
\textsuperscript{121} Dynamite, interview by JayQuan, n.d., http://thafoundation.com/cowboy.htm.
through musical performance. “That was the whole idea back then to include the people who came to see you. [...] They were part of your rhyme. They were part of hip-hop.”

DJing and Emceening were heavily masculine actions. Sharon Green, a.k.a. Sha-Rock of the Funky 4+1, was the first and at the time only female MC. She noted that she was the only woman rapping at the time. One of her friends, Dorian, was meant to be a fellow MC but her boyfriend, DJ Breakout, “didn’t want her to Emcee because they were talking,” showing how a masculine hierarchy did come into play even in hip-hop music’s earliest days. At the same time, Sha-Rock claims that she never experienced any kind of sexism from audiences – only respect. She also later formed the all-woman MC trio, Us Girls, with Lisa Lee and Debbie Dee. They never had prominent success but were featured in the classic movie *Beat Street*.

Emcees and DJs were naturally aware of the ties of urban development and systemic racism, especially in the Bronx. “We all know that there is racism in this country. Everybody knows that.”

Responding to Chuck D of Public Enemy’s claim that rap was the Black community’s CNN – that rap spoke truth to power about the nation’s ills – writer and musician Duke Bootee stated, “It represents the hopes and

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125 Although not from the Bronx, Deborah Harry of Blondie and Sylvia Robinson (founder of Sugar Hill Records) were instrumental in rap’s early nationwide success. There was an influx of women into rap in the 1980s, influenced by Sha-Rock. Some of the most successful and adored MCs were women or all-women groups: Queen Latifah, Salt-N-Pepa, Roxanne Shante, MC Lyte, and the Sequence (from Columbia, SC) all received critical and commercial acclaim, while using rap music to promote Black feminism and empowerment. Rap as a whole, however, remained heavily masculine.
126 Theodore, interview.
By the 1990s rap had become regional, and different communities used rap to express their regional identities—a tradition since rap’s earliest days. Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and other residents of the Bronx used the artform to form a sense of “the Bronx” that later organizers used to improve the material conditions of the borough. Kool Herc always “wanted rap to always be a positive, beautiful music. I wanted it to be political. I want it to stay that way.”

The audiences responded to DJs and Emcees in kind. Bronxites in the 1970s understood that “they spoke to our generation. They talked, looked & dressed like us and this was truly our thing! We still loved R&B but Rap is direct. It doesn’t sugarcoat and it cuts out the middleman.” Afrika Bambaataa particularly created a culture of unity through his Zulu Nation. The Nation were peacekeepers and he acted like a big brother everybody: “Bam had a community, so whether Spanish or Black, if a brother had a system in his house he would give to Bam what ever was needed.” Through affirmation or rejection of certain records he played and their reception to the dancers, “the audience made Herc special. They exerted agency as they ‘enunciat[ed] aesthetic judgments that influenc[ed] [the] performers’ [in this case the DJ’s] selection of songs.’” According to EZ Mike, a childhood friend of Grandmaster Flash and later

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127 Bootee, interview.
130 Busy Bee, interview.
131 Ewoodzie, Break Beats in the Bronx, 48.
member of his Furious Five, “Herc’s vision was to bring the people together for music purposes.”

Historian Suzanne Smith describes this phenomenon in Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit. Even when explicit political messages are absent, African Americans still found meaning in the songs and art produced. This – along with Butler’s performance theory and bell hooks’ idea that “[Black art] was regarded as testimony, bearing witness, challenging racist thinking which suggested that black folks were not fully human” – insinuates that it was the community who made hip-hop political and relevant through their unified support of the art.

**Rap Crosses the River**

In the early years of hip-hop, Manhattan remained a place of disco and funk. This new hip-hop craze was too flashy, fast, and street, especially in the more bourgeois downtown areas. However, by the late 1970s, the word of hip-hop was spreading, and Harlemites and other upper Manhattan residents started to check out this “new thing.”

The Audubon Ballroom represented hip-hop’s first major foray across the Harlem River. In July 1976, Grandmaster Flash visited Harlem with his girlfriend to see The Omen, where he was stunned by the size of the crowd – just to see a movie. “Two thousand people!” Flash reflected, “How do you get two thousand people in the same place at the same time. […] the crowd screams every five minutes. Me, I spend the whole movie fantasizing about the crowd… imagining they’re screaming for me.” After the movie, Flash ran into a man wearing “a Kangol hat, red Pro Keds, and a big graffiti piece

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painted down the side of his bellbottoms,” standard hip-hop fare. This man immediately
starts going on about how much he loves Flash and his music. “Damn! I know they know
my name in the Bronx, but up here in Harlem? On the train ride home, it’s all I can think
about.” 134 Flash’s manager, Ray Chandler, surprised Flash a week later with a return trip
to Harlem to scope out a new place to rock. As Flash tells it:

[Chandler] makes me close my eyes until I get out of the car.
When he tells me to open ’em, I can’t believe what I see. The
Audubon Ballroom. The joint where Malcolm X got shot dead.
Malcolm X, one of the biggest men in American history. The joint
is the biggest thing I have ever seen. […] ‘We’re gonna blow it up
in here,’ Ray tells me as we’re casing the state. ‘I know we are.’ 135

Flash was in complete awe and overwhelmed by the building’s size and history. The
Audubon clearly meant a lot to him and likely the wider Black community in Harlem and
the Bronx as well.

Chandler’s choice in location for Flash’s first concert in Manhattan was symbolic
– whether intended or not, he essentially forced the comparison between Flash and
Malcolm X. The comparison was not totally undeserved. Flash, too, had overcome some
petty crime to become a major name in a new movement – hip-hop. He was a community
leader in the Bronx through his DJ’ing and concerts. In the weeks leading up to the
concert, Flash was overwhelmed by the prospect of performing in such a legendary venue
to so many people – 3,000 according to the Fire Marshall’s sign. Unable to sleep, and
wanting to impress the new crowd, he invented a new, innovative DJing technique to
unleash on the Audubon. “A new way to cut without cueing. It’s based on sight

134 Grandmaster Flash and David Ritz, The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash My Life,
My Beats: A Memoir (New York; Enfield: Crown Archetype, 2008), 120.
135 Grandmaster Flash and Ritz, 120–21.
recognition and needle drops. […] I can cut twice as fast when I do it.”

Despite worries that it would not fill up, by 1 a.m. the Audubon was packed and there was a line two-blocks out the door. Future hip-hop legend Kool Moe Dee was among the 3,000, one of his first exposures to rap. Flash later reminisced that the performance was the last time he was “truly happy.”

Hip-hop exploded in Harlem, and the Audubon Ballroom became a common concert hall. In the late 70s and the earliest years of the 80s, some of the most prominent names in hip-hop performed there: Afrika Bambaataa, Jazzy Jay, DJ Red Alert, the Soul Sonic Force MCs, Grand Wizard Theodore, Lovebug Starsky, and many others. One flyer advertised a New Year’s Eve “Great MC Showdown,” with a $100 grand prize for solo performers and $400 grand prize for groups, judged by Grand Wizard Theodore, Kool AJ, and Darryl C (with free champagne!). Grandmaster Flash and his Furious Five would perform at the Audubon again many more times. In fact, one of the few surviving recordings of a Furious Five concert is of a December 31, 1978 show at the Audubon Ballroom.

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136 Grandmaster Flash and Ritz, 123.
In the 1980s, Harlem – along with Queens and Brooklyn – supplanted the Bronx as hip-hop’s capital. It was also this expansion into Harlem and the Heights that, for lack of a better word, “legitimized” hip-hop. As Murray Forman notes, Bronx DJs appearing at the Audubon and Apollo in the late 1970s “introduced the potential of the music to a wider segment of the black public, reflecting the enduring importance of Harlem as a barometer of black cultural taste.”

From Harlem, hip-hop spread throughout the five boroughs and into New Jersey and Philadelphia. Once rap transitioned from a live-performance-only thing into an actual recorded project, it was Harlem rappers that made some of the biggest splashes. Harlem native Kurtis Blow was the first rap artist to sign a major label deal, and his 1980 hit, “The Breaks,” was the first rap record to go gold. Sugar Hill Records - the first exclusively rap label, formed in 1979 by Sylvia Robinson - signed artists from all over, signifying rap’s growing geographical diversity. For example, the Sugarhill Gang – whose “Rapper’s Delight” was the first rap hit ever – was from Englewood, New Jersey. Sugar Hill also signed Harlem natives The Treacherous

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Forman, The 'Hood Comes First, 73.
Three (Kool Moe Dee, L.A. Sunshine, and DJ Easy Lee) and Spoonie Gee (one time a member of the Treacherous Three), and their “fast-rapping” style – best seen on Spoonie Gee’s “Spoonin Rap” and the Treacherous Three’s “New Rap Language” – revolutionized MC’ing.

The spread into Harlem allowed hip-hop to grow in another way. Now the culture was coming directly into contact with the downtown Manhattan art-scene. Most famously, alt-rockers like Blondie and the Tom-Tom Club invested in hip-hop artists and musicians, while making the style famous through their own songs.\(^{141}\) Rappers and DJs opened for alt-rock and punk bands like the Clash, while Afrika Bambaataa played at art shows and galleries in Soho and West Village.\(^{142}\)

The shift to greater New York City and the beginning of recorded rap albums turned hip-hop into the next “thing,” “the newest and most influential form of black musical expression to emerge from this period.”\(^{143}\) The genre’s geographical articulations were especially influential on its applicability elsewhere. Black and Latinx communities in the American East Coast, then the Southeast, Midwest, West Coast, and eventually Latin America and the Caribbean were attracted to its language of autonomy in the face of the literal destruction of one’s neighborhood. These ideas were not necessarily revolutionary. However, rap music presented them in a more explicit and (very importantly) catchy and funky way that they took on new, deeper meanings. This was happening at the same time that the American urban development crises of the 1950s

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\(^{142}\) Forman, 75.
\(^{143}\) Forman, 106.
through the 70s were being replaced by more subtle yet sinister colonial practices, seen
by the rise of Reagan and the New Right. The rhetoric of “welfare queens” and the
intensifying of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration created a new racial culture war.
Rap music became not just an articulation against the literal destruction of communities
of color but made the connection between those practices and the New Right’s
hegemonic racism. These trends played out most visibly in the fight over the Audubon
Ballroom.
Chapter 4: Save the Audubon! - Plans and Responses

In the 1980s, Washington Heights, Columbia University, Latinx and African American activism, historical preservationists, and hip-hop culture all came to a head when Columbia announced that it was buying the Audubon Ballroom with plans to demolish it and build a modern biomedical research center on the lot. Debates abounded over how much say people had over their communities and whether vague economic potential mattered more than maintaining a historical landscape. This chapter describes the actual battle over the Audubon Ballroom’s fate as fought by these factions, among others. This chapter is the climax of this story: the Audubon is essentially a case-study on urban redevelopment and community cultural reaction.

The first section of this chapter discusses Columbia’s initial plans for the Audubon and how these ideas shifted throughout the 1980s. It will specifically show how Columbia and New York City officials, despite knowledge of the Audubon’s architectural and social significance, simply did not desire to preserve or even rehabilitate the ballroom. The second section documents the many reactions and protests against these plans. Sections three and four detail more specific reactions: preservation and hip-hop. The Audubon reflected many of the debates historical preservationists had regarding gentrification, bulldozer development, and racism within landmarking and preservation practice. This section, it should be noted, is not a history of New York City preservation, but an account of the debates among preservationists in the city about the Audubon’s worth. Meanwhile, hip-hop artists, continuing their history of rebelling against urban
development practices – as documented in Chapter Two – stood up and lent their voice to the movement. The final section of this chapter looks at the final decision of the ballroom, handed down in 1990. A compromise led by Manhattan president Ruth Messinger finalized plans for the Audubon, preserving and rehabilitating the façade and much of the interior of the ballroom.

**Columbia’s Plans**

In February 1983, Columbia University announced it was purchasing the land of the Audubon Ballroom from the city of New York for the purpose of building “a space-age medical research center on the site.” Part of the interest in this lot was its proximity to Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, making it a convenient spot for biomedical research. The purchase cost around $450,000 according to the *New York Times*. This purchase was less full ownership than a lease from the city for a ninety-nine-year period – which was ownership in all-but-name. Columbia would pay increasingly higher percentages of the real estate tax over a ten to fifteen-year period before it would have the option to buy the land outright. The estimates for the new medical center were initially around $200 million but estimates had shrunk to $130 to 160 million by 1985, although no money had been committed by the end of 1984. These estimates included the cost of the medical center itself and the destruction of the Audubon Ballroom itself. Initially the city planned to contribute “well in excess of $10 million” along with millions in tax

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credits and an Urban Development Action Grant of approximately $10 to 20 million.\textsuperscript{146}

By April 1994, while construction was underway, the Sherman Fairchild Foundation announced it had granted an additional $10 million to Columbia University.\textsuperscript{147}

In 1986, the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) announced the Audubon Ballroom was eligible for listing on the National Register. This listing would not only have provided limited protections for the building, it also qualified it for numerous federal, state, and local tax exemptions for any rehabilitation project.\textsuperscript{148} While SHPO admitted the cost of rehabilitating the Audubon for an economically viable modern use would be add significant cost to the already rather unwieldy price-tag, and would require immediate action, these tax credits would likely balance the costs out in the long-term. Columbia had also hired the architectural firms Salmon Associates and Bond Ryder James to assess the feasibility of rehabilitation, and in early 1984 they – along with Merrill Lynch - had determined that it could be saved, but the costs of salvaging would be too great if rehabilitation was not immediate. No action was taken and subsequent analyses in 1987 and 1989 confirmed that the Audubon was beyond redemption without massive costs.\textsuperscript{149}

It was clear, however, that the University had little interest in saving the ballroom no matter the cost. The heads of the University were ambivalent on how much of the Audubon would remain. Throughout 1983 and 1984, Columbia waited for investing and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[146] Adler, “Audubon Awaits Fund Report.”
\item[148] Kantrowitz, “FOCUS Say Goodbye to the Audubon Ballroom.”
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broker management corporation Merrill Lynch to provide a “complete market analysis” before they worked out a complete financing scheme and begin construction.\textsuperscript{150} However, Columbia Vice Provost Kathleen Mullinix – who was coordinating the majority of the project – made clear at the very beginning that they “would rather see any building put up in the ballroom’s footprint, rather than the ‘wasteland’ that now exists.” While the original plan was to rehabilitate the ballroom for commercial space, the “retention of the exterior and facades of the Audubon [were] ‘secondary’ to the interest in reviving the stretch of Broadway.”\textsuperscript{151} Columbia University President Michael Sovern agreed with Mullinix’s assessment of the ballroom. In his memoir, he called it “an abandoned relic, on a street where addicts would come to resupply.”\textsuperscript{152} As with some of Columbia’s other “renewal” projects, Sovern believed the best solution to an area stricken by poverty and crime was to simply demolish the whole place and start over. If preserved, however, CU’s plan was to convert the second floor ballroom into 38,000 square feet of commercial laboratory space; if the Audubon was destroyed, the space would be filled by a “10-story, 220,000 square foot facility.”\textsuperscript{153} Indeed, the initial idea was to rehabilitate, partially to “assure the community that Columbia was not only interested in a ‘land-grab.’”\textsuperscript{154} However, it is possible Mullinix and the rest of Columbia’s leadership had no intention of going through with the rehabilitation and the Merrill Lynch report in late

\textsuperscript{150} Adler, “Audubon Awaits Fund Report.”
\textsuperscript{153} Adler, “CU May Destroy Historic Ballroom.”
\textsuperscript{154} Adler.
1984 only further convinced them. The report argued the ballroom was beyond repair and far too small for the start-ups and corporations that would want to do work with Columbia. The cheapest and most prudent option, then, was to raze it to make room for a new six-story lab building. This new lab building would be a part of a research park occupying the entire area from 165th to 168th between Broadway and Audubon Avenue and consisting of at least five buildings. Max Bond, the chair of Columbia’s School of Architecture and Planning architecture division, was in charge of designing the new lot. The southeast corner of the Audubon lot would be reserved for commercial spaces, with plans for a restaurant, a coffee shop, and a Barnes & Noble bookstore. Part of the new lot would include a Center for Disease Prevention between St. Nicholas and Audubon Avenues and 167th and 168th Streets, just north of the Audubon site.


155 Max Bond was the cousin of Civil Rights Movement leader Julian Bond and his father, Max Bond, Sr., was president of the University of Liberia. Adler; Craiglow, “CU Likely to Build Lab on Audubon Ballroom Site”; Craiglow, “Audubon Construction to Start in 1988.”

The city itself seemed ambivalent about the fate of the Audubon. City and borough representatives believed the new Columbia complex would bring in hundreds of jobs and would develop the economically downtrodden region. Michael Sovern recalled that Columbia had “the support of every elected official representing a district that included our main campus or medical center,” adding that “half of them were African American.” Only one official, Manhattan borough president Ruth Messinger, was the exception, he argued. Sovern certainly overstated his case – Moises Perez, for example, remembers he was able to convince many borough representatives to assist in the effort, while other elected officials like Virginia Fields were on the side of the Audubon – but protestors had their work cut out for them.

Preservationist Michael Henry Adams believed that anyone worth convincing had already been bought off and co-opted, including the mayor. At a Hispanic Society of America meeting in Harlem, Adams ran into Mayor David Dinkins and asked for his help regarding the Audubon. As he remembers it, Dinkins was rather incredulous, saying, “Help you? They’re going to make it a biotech research lab.” Adams specified, asking, “But can you help us to preserve it? It’s an important African American landmark.’ And [Dinkins] said, ‘All the landmarks are important.’” It was an exercise in futility that led Adams to conclude that Harlem leaders were “useless […] once they moved off Park Avenue.” Adams was not alone in thinking Dinkins would help. Being the first African

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American mayor of New York, and being a Harlem local, preservationists and community organizers thought Dinkins would be on their side.

Dinkins was, in fact, concerned about the ballroom, being a local of Harlem and an admirer of Malcolm X. Even as Manhattan Borough President he had recognized the sensitivity surrounding the plans.\textsuperscript{159} As mayor, however, Dinkins had to deal with the realities of politics. He had many more constituents now than just Harlem, and he had to “[maintain] his electoral coalition of blacks, Latinos, and liberal whites,” some of whom supported the Audubon plans.\textsuperscript{160} He was also aware of the manner in which news media would present him. As Wilbur Rich has pointed out, Black politicians like Dinkins were “rarely on an even playing field with reporters,” many of whom catered to white readers and treated Black politicians harsher than white ones.\textsuperscript{161} Dinkins thus had to be careful with the Audubon. But some involved in the Audubon movement saw this caution as dismissal. In May, 1990, for example, at a meeting at Columbia about the project, when a pair of students called for him to “Remember you are an African,” Dinkins shouted back, “Listen, I was black before you two were born!”\textsuperscript{162} Preservationist Laurie Beckelman remembered that the Dinkins administration was incredibly hostile to any preservation activity. She and Anthony Tung both remembered how Dinkins was “one of the main obstacles to the designation of two highly significant landmarks in regard to African American history in the United States,” the Audubon and the African American Burial

\textsuperscript{161} Rich, 2.  
\textsuperscript{162} Purdum, “Ballroom Is Sensitive Issue for Dinkins.”
Moises Perez would have agreed with these perspectives, although at the time he still attempted to convince the city of the Audubon’s worth.

Columbia, with its vast resources and personal relationships with city officials, certainly had a major influence on politicians’ approval of the plans. However, many most likely believed in the research center and its ability to improve the Washington Heights neighborhood. Even if the biomedical research itself did not hire locally, the stores that would be dotted along the ground floor on the Broadway and 165th facades possibly would.

While its proximity to Columbia’s hospital and location on Broadway partially inspired the University’s choice in the Audubon site, it was also chosen because it was supposedly empty. Sovern called it an “abandoned relic” and Mullinx similarly called it empty and a waste of space. However, this was far from the case. Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s the Audubon held offices and storage for the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development. A couple stores, a synagogue, and a part-time Hispanic school also resided there until forced to relocate in 1984. While the Audubon had certainly seen better days – much of the interior was crumbling, the stage

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164 Sovern, “Remembering Malcolm X and Working with the Community”; Adler, “CU May Destroy Historic Ballroom.”
165 Kantrowitz, “FOCUS Say Goodbye to the Audubon Ballroom.”
166 Potter, “Columbia Policies Value the Bottom Line over Human Rights”; Perez, interview.
was rotten, the outside was covered in graffiti – it was hardly abandoned and activists would later point out to Sovern and Columbia’s lies as an early indication that they would never negotiate with the community in good faith.

**Community Response**

"If you destroy the Audubon, you're committing an act of genocide." —Anonymous Black activist

Community response was almost immediate and only intensified over the years, culminating in 1990 and 1991. Part of this sight delay was the constant delays in construction and plans, but when plans finalized in the late 80s the residents of northern Manhattan started holding rallies and concerts to raise awareness. Community leader Moises Perez remembers how they eventually had marches from central Harlem to the Audubon every single Friday. They would hold speeches and massive artist exhibits in protest of the plans. Individuals and organizations all had their own reasons for protesting Columbia’s plans, but the overall goal was to pressure city government into stopping the plans. It was “imperative,” Michael Adams argued, “that we enlist the support of the ‘powerful’ in the battle to save the Audubon. […] we each have the power to win this conflict through our collective voices.” Columbia students themselves also joined the struggle, with many involved forming the Malcolm X Save the Audubon Coalition (STAC). Debates about the Audubon raged in the pages of the University’s paper, *Columbia Daily Spectator*.

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168 Perez, interview.
The most prominent argument was to defend the legacy of Malcolm X and local Black and Latinx history. The Audubon Ballroom “more dramatically than any extant New York landmark – [reflected] the history of the African-American struggle for freedom and equality.”

The December 12th Movement emerged as a leading organization in this respect. Founded on December 12, 1987, the D12 Movement was a highly visible organization of local New York anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist movements; Robert “Sonny” Carson and Viola Plummer have been some of the more (in)famous figures to be associated with the organization. The Movement’s high point came when they organized a massive protest and memorial rally outside the Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1990, the 25th anniversary of Malcolm X’s murder. Students, local activists, professional activists, and even the Met Council all showed up to protest Columbia’s treatment of Black history, their practice of evicting tenants of areas they took over, and the real worry that poor, local Black and Brown youth would become “guinea pigs” to the new research center’s “gene-splicing and germ research.”

Among some of the notable guests and speakers in the over 500 strong protest were New York State Senator David Paterson, Sonny Carson, Reverend Herbert Daughtry, John Clark of the African-American Progressive Network, and Michael Adams (on behalf of City Councilwoman C. Virginia Fields). The popular talking point was upper Manhattan’s “serious under-landmarking” issue when it came to historic buildings and areas related to non-white history. “All too often, the heritage of African Americans is discounted,” Adams said at the rally. “Ours is a community well acquainted with poverty and

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170 Adams.
171 “Malcolm X Anniversary Spurs Audubon Protest.”
suffering, so that it is of the utmost importance to create jobs, housing, and economic opportunity. However, frequently, institutions like Columbia have offered the vague promise of jobs and development at the expense of our cultural and architectural legacy.”

Ned Kaufman of the Municipal Art Society questioned how a building owned by the city could have its fate determined by a private institution and argued that if it were in downtown Manhattan it would already be a landmark. Thomas Bess, former Chairman of the South Bronx Longwood Historic Landmark District – a community with its own issue of urban “renewal” – pointed to other iconic buildings like the Renaissance Casino and the Savoy that had also been torn down.172

Michael Adams, however, noted how even the December 12th Movement was hesitant to fight for the Audubon. When Adams reached out to Carson, they relegated the Audubon to the youth branch, “people just out of high school.” While Carson later came

Figure 4.2. December 12th Movement holding protest outside Ballroom against Columbia's Audubon plans. Clarence Elie Rivera, 1990, Whose Streets? Our Streets! http://www.whosestreets.photo/race.html

172 Adams, “Politicians Lead Fight to Save Audubon Ballroom.”
around, it was the youth – led by Omowale Clay – who helped organize most of the protests. In 1990, Adams and the December 12th kids held a sit-in at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Although the LPC was warned of the sit-in by *New York Daily News* reporter Joan Shepherd, they did not believe her, so, as Adams remembers, “we had all of our young people [holding] up these placards that had X on them from Malcolm X” in the full LPC hearing room. Later, on April 13, 1990, they joined Columbia University’s Coalition to Save the Audubon to hold a protest outside the university’s Low Library. Here, the Coalition and Movement vowed to ramp up civil disobedience if political pressure failed to change Columbia’s plans. They considered the destruction of the Audubon as part of “a continuing policy of attempted genocide on the black and Latino community” and especially questioned the necessity of tearing it down since a third of the space was planned to be used as a parking lot.

Others also pointed out that replacing this symbol of African American and Latinx history with a biomedical center was tone-deaf to the rather poor history bio-science experimentation had with people of color throughout American (and indeed, world) history. In the most overt insult, it had taken half an hour for an ambulance to show up after Malcolm had been shot to take him to the (Columbia-owned and operated) hospital directly across the street. Now, Columbia wanted to erase the same spot where he died to add to the expanding medical complex.

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173 Adams states it was Laurie Beckelman’s first day, which was in 1990.
174 Adams, Michael Henry Adams | NYPAP.
176 Perez, interview.
To most, the Audubon was yet another sign of Columbia University’s most
destructive and racist tendencies. While proclaiming that their plans had to be prevented
“by any means necessary,” Adams argued that Columbia’s plans demonstrated “a
poignant example of the financial and cultural inequities which persist in minority
communities.”\textsuperscript{177} Columbia did not discount the ballroom’s historical significance.
Nevertheless, they ignored the community’s pleas and, in the words of one Columbia
student, “[felt] that it is its prerogative to gleefully cast judgements as to the true
historical worth of the Audubon.” This student glibly thanked Columbia “for liberating
my people from the apparently ponderous task of judging for ourselves.”\textsuperscript{178} Famed
architectural critic Herbert Muschamp took Columbia to task for their plans. Although, he
argued, the building was mostly empty and falling apart, “it nonetheless overflowed with
meaning, and so, alas, did Columbia’s proposal. It dripped with disregard for history and
for the university’s responsibility to help a city heal.”\textsuperscript{179} This proposal was simply yet
another in a very long line of instances of Columbia bulldozing through the city for its
own gain. For many it harkened back to the student riots of 1968 against the University’s,
ultimately failed, plans to build a gymnasium in Morningside Park.\textsuperscript{180} More
contemporary to the Audubon, meanwhile, was Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital’s

\textsuperscript{177} Adams, “Politicians Lead Fight to Save Audubon Ballroom.”
April 16, 1990.
\textsuperscript{179} Herbert Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon: This Fall, the Jackhammers Will
Start Pounding on a Site That Overflows with Meaning.,” \textit{New York Times}, August 23,
\textsuperscript{180} Charles Grutzner, “SLUM CLEARANCE ASKED IN BIG AREA AROUND
COLUMBIA: Morningside Heights Group Seeks to Protect Cultural and Religious Sites
Reclamation of the Morningside Heights Area Is Urged in Report RENEWAL SOUGHT
USE OF 1965 PLAN”; Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”
“expansionist ambitions” which constantly threatened the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{181} Saving the Audubon was not just an attempt to preserve the building but to prevent future instances of Columbian expansion.

Not everyone disagreed with Columbia’s plans: there were frequent voices of support throughout upper Manhattan. Most support revolved around its proposed economic benefits.\textsuperscript{182} One Columbia student, Stephen Schatz, told \textit{Columbia Daily Spectator} that if the students protesting the plan “stopped to consider a second the needs of the community, they’d see the benefits of Columbia’s plan. You can be irrational for a while and you can be upset, but then you have to think.”\textsuperscript{183} Another student argued that the protests demonstrated “the self-patronizing liberal for the sake of being liberal attitude.” Rather than the new biomedical facility being a biohazard, the current, dilapidated building was the danger. This student believed the plans would bring jobs and other benefits. Responding to claims about community self-autonomy, he also stated that this was Columbia’s property and could do what it wished - an interesting framework, since Columbia did not, in fact, own the property.\textsuperscript{184} One anonymous article in the \textit{New York Times} also criticized the protesters. The author believed Columbia’s promise that the new building would be an appropriate memorial and argued that a decaying ballroom was not a good symbol for Malcolm’s legacy. The university and the city had made compromises in the face of demands, but the protesters were never satisfied. The author

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\textsuperscript{181} Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”
\textsuperscript{183} Kantrowitz, “Protesters Blast Plan to Raze Audubon.”
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argued the protesters would end up blocking everything and “may wind up with nothing but the shell of an abandoned building. And that would only honor intransigence.”\textsuperscript{185}

New York City Councilman Stanley Michels, who represented Washington Heights, emphatically argued that the Audubon was “an eyesore, a blight on the community” and that Malcolm X was still too controversial to memorialize. Michels cared more for his actual constituents: “This thing will mean jobs for my people…everyone I’ve talked to is for it.” Saving the building was far too expensive and if the protesters really wanted to save it they “would put their money where their mouth is.”\textsuperscript{186} Columbia student Noah Potter later argued the supposed “widespread approval” was instead “widespread lack of information, which is quickly becoming widespread anger” as locals learned what was really at stake.\textsuperscript{187}

These arguments took Columbia’s word that the jobs created would be available locally, or would at least boost local economy indirectly, and elided the history of bulldozer-based renewal in the name of economic development. Washington Heights had seen better days, to be sure. The Audubon debates took place at the height of the borough’s crack epidemic, crime rates were high, and unemployment was a large and constant threat.\textsuperscript{188} However, many believed Columbia’s project would not help. There was no guarantee, for example, that construction workers would be hired locally, or would provide equal opportunity for Black and Latinx workers. The jobs within the complex itself would require highly skilled scientists with degrees that many in

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\textsuperscript{186} Adams, “Politicians Lead Fight to Save Audubon Ballroom.”  \\
\textsuperscript{187} Potter, “Columbia Policies Value the Bottom Line over Human Rights.”  \\
\textsuperscript{188} Snyder, \textit{Crossing Broadway}, 158–95.
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Washington Heights did not have access to. The good jobs would go to “white scientists from outside the community [leaving] menial labor for local minorities,” if at all.  

Malcolm X’s own family appeared rather ambivalent about the fate of the ballroom. Dr. Betty Shabazz – his widow – vacillated on Columbia’s plans for the ballroom. In 1985, she said that, although she “cannot bear the thought of entering the ballroom,” it should not be destroyed. Despite its horrible memories, she argued it was worthy of saving. In late 1989, however, Dr. Shabazz stated that she still “would like for them to save the stage” but was worried about the overall condition of the building and cost of saving the building. “If saving the building is possible, that is desirous,” but she also did not want it to be saved if it were structurally unsound and beyond hope – which Columbia had made true by not working to preserve it sooner. She had no comment about its use as a biomedical center and did not commit to testifying at the community board hearings. Columbia University Director of Planning and Development Bernhard Haeckel told the Columbia Daily Spectator that “she [had] made many, many constructive suggestions” that would be taken under consideration. Out of these negotiations, Shabazz was able to commit Columbia to providing a memorial plaque at the new research center along with a $250,000 Malcolm X Scholarship Fund.  

Reactions to Shabazz’s statements were mixed. Michael Adams claimed that – like every other major figure who could possibly influence Columbia’s plans – the University had given her “some kind of appointment and sent her on some trip some

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189 Kantrowitz, “Protesters Blast Plan to Raze Audubon.”
190 Dunlap and Anderson, “Site of Malcolm X Assassination Has an Uncertain Future.”
191 Kantrowitz, “FOCUS Say Goodbye to the Audubon Ballroom.”
192 “Malcolm X Anniversary Spurs Audubon Protest.”
place or another, so she was all down with the project and said that she had been told that the building was beyond repair.”  

Many argued that a scholarship and plaque were not nearly enough: the scholarship seemed paltry compared to the price of the complex, while Columbia professor Donald Reynolds called the plaque a “carnivalish approach.”

Moises Perez, meanwhile, figured her statement as a sign that, whatever Columbia’s plan was, it would be done in good faith. He believed that, if she had signed on, the deal was as good as done. However, Alianza Dominicana members and others in the community came to him asking “What do we get out of it?” They tried to convince Perez to not trust Columbia’s promises, no matter what Dr. Shabazz said.

One of Malcolm’s brothers, Robert Little, spoke on the Audubon Ballroom at a Columbia University lecture on February 9, 1993. This lecture, sponsored by Dean Jack Greenberg and including Columbia professors like Charles Hamilton and Eric Foner, discussed the legacy of Malcolm X and how best to remember him. Little spoke on the many ways his brother’s legacy had been co-opted by various individuals and ideological groups since his death, “probably because most people didn’t take the time to figure him out while he was alive.” When asked about the Audubon Ballroom, he emphasized that he believed studying Malcolm’s thoughts and beliefs was more important than preserving a building. “I’m not very involved in the edifice complex,” he stated during the lecture. “I don’t believe in celebrating death. I have no vested interest in what happens to the

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193 Adams, Michael Henry Adams | NYPAP.
194 Kantrowitz, “FOCUS Say Goodbye to the Audubon Ballroom.”
195 Perez, interview.
Audubon Ballroom, and it wouldn’t matter if I did.” El-Shabbaz’s family clearly cared more about preserving the man’s intellectual legacy than any single building.

There is another angle of the Audubon movement that did not receive the same level of attention as the sides fighting over Malcolm X’s legacy or the historical integrity of the ballroom yet is equally important: the Latinx side. The Audubon’s history with the local Latinx and Caribbean community has been previously stated. And while many activists were themselves Latinx, and the many more Black activists mentioned the ballroom’s history with Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and others, this history was generally put to the wayside in favor of the much more attractive Malcolm X association. Luis Aponte-Pares points out that “the absence of Latino preservation groups with adequate monetary and political means to stop this demolition gave city government free reign to ignore Latino history.”

Even African American activists and preservationists had more political say and cultural clout in the eyes of New York City and Columbia University than Latinx people. The Audubon’s role as a Manhattan piazza, or community center – especially for the large Dominican population in Washington Heights – and the history of the San Juan Theatre were relatively ignored by most sides. Moises Perez also noted how difficult it was to carve out a space for Latinx people – both a discursive one in the movement and a literal space during the construction of Columbia’s biomedical complex.

Moises Perez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1954 and he, his twin brother, and three other siblings, moved to Manhattan with their mother in 1964, where

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they lived just ten blocks away from the Audubon. They moved again in 1968 to
Brooklyn, where Perez spent the rest of his young life. He applied to Columbia
University School for International Studies before realizing his calling was local, non-
profit work. He wanted to help the community he grew up in, especially the growing
Dominican population in the Heights. Perez worked as a fellow at the Urban League for a
year but, realizing his calling was his hometown and not traveling, returned to Harlem
and the Heights to develop non-profits there in the late 1980s. Opening in 1986 and
operating out of what he called “a little storefront on 176th,” Perez and the new Alianza
Dominicana organized after-school programs and marches and various other programs
trying to assist the neighborhood dealing with over-policing, crime, and crack.198

When Columbia announced their plans to demolish the Audubon and the
surrounding block, Perez fought to protect it and especially the couple small Dominican
non-profits based in its storefronts. He noticed that Columbia’s plan included razing a
small, triangular piece of land bordered by St. Nicholas Avenue, Audubon Avenue, and
166th Street, just west of the Audubon. A professor from Columbia came to Perez and
said the university was willing to set aside this land for community use if they accepted
the plan. Perez said going in front of the neighborhood community board to convince
them of the plan was the most painful thing he ever did and one of the things he regrets
most. His two lieutenants refused to even enter his office, they had to speak in Perez’s
car. One young Dominican mother, he remembers, spoke with him for over two hours,
telling him, “You cannot trust Columbia.” Others called him a sell-out. Perez, however,

198 Perez, interview; Robin Finn, “PUBLIC LIVES: A Time of Mourning, and a Rare
despite remaining reservations, believed that Columbia’s plans were going to happen either way – they were simply too powerful – and getting something for the Dominican community was better than nothing.

**Preservationist Angle**

“Even when a good building replaces an eyesore, the disruption can be painful, for it robs us of memories and violates our sense of control. For cities to work as social organisms, people need to feel a proprietary interest in their surroundings. Yet almost every ground-breaking shatters that benign illusion of ownership.”

- Herbert Muschamp

Although race, memory, and identity all played a major role in the Audubon arguments, one of the most vocal factions fighting for the ballroom was professional

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199 Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”
historic preservationists. These preservationists wanted the Audubon to be saved and both its interior and exterior rehabilitated for continued use. Their arguments for keeping it around were certainly backed up by the standards of the profession. The primary standard for which all structures are considered worthy for preservation is the National Register of Historic Place’s criterion. To qualify as historically significant – and worthy of federal protection – a building has to meet one of four criteria: be associated with events that have made significant contributions to American history; be associated with the life or lives of a significant historical figure(s); embody the distinctive characteristics of an architectural style or represent the work of a master architect; or yields important prehistory information. The Audubon Ballroom certainly passed most of these tests: it was a beautiful and early example of a celebrated architect, Thomas Lamb; it was one of the few extant buildings directly associated with the life of Malcolm X, especially from his post-Nation life; and it was an important space for Jewish, Black, and Latinx people in Manhattan.

Although one reason for the Audubon’s lack of preservation was undoubtedly due to Malcolm X’s more controversial reputation, historic preservation during the 1980s had a somewhat troubling relationship with race more broadly speaking. New York City’s preservationists had not defended African American heritage sites well enough, either. Landmarking was the city’s most prominent example of historic preservation and Black heritage sites were woefully underrepresented. By 1998, of the nearly 1,000 landmarked buildings in the city, barely 100 were located in communities of color and, as a City Limits article pointed out, only sixteen of these were due to their association with non-
white historical value. The rest were landmarked due to their association with prominent white people who had lived in them much earlier. As well, only 135 of the 750 blocks protected by historic districts were in Black or Latinx communities. Even Central Harlem – home of the most famous Black cultural movement in US history – had not been designated a historical landmark district by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). Along with the Audubon Ballroom, places like the Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club had not been landmarked. As well, in the mid-1980s, the LPC had puzzlingly slowed its landmark designations, despite plenty of potential landmarks still present.

As early as 1975, activists had pointed out New York City’s rather limited landmarking decisions, even towards buildings that fit the commission’s criteria. At the beginning of that year, Columbia sociologist Herbert Gans noted New York’s LPC narrow and elitist landmarking practices, beginning a brief but bitter battle with Ada Louise Huxtable, architectural critic of the *New York Times*. Gans called out the LPC’s tendency to “designate the stately mansions of the rich and buildings designed by famous architects […] distort[ing] the real past, exaggerate[ing] affluence and grandeur, and

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200 Founded in 1965 following the loss of the historically significant Pennsylvania Station, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission is the largest municipal preservation agency in America. It determines buildings worthy of listing as a landmark if, one, it was built at least 30 years prior and, two, it had “a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, state, or nation.” “Types and Criteria,” *NYC: Landmarks Preservation Commission*, https://www1.nyc.gov/site/lpc/designations/landmark-types-criteria.page.


denigrat[ing] the present.” Gans called for a more democratic preservation, a sampling of all people and all histories. He even argued for a preservation of the slums and dilapidated buildings (of which the Audubon was a part of by 1980) to provide “visible evidence of how many people still have to call them home.” 203 Huxtable responded by noting that, of the over 11,000 buildings landmarked, the overwhelming majority were “vernacular” and the LPC had landmarked many of the kinds of buildings Gans asked for already. 204 However, she believed that “esthetic singularity” was more important than cultural meaning. 205 Huxtable appeared to get the last word, only because Gans’ response was relegated to the “Letters to the Editor” section. Still, he pointed out how the vast majority of landmarked neighborhoods and buildings built after 1875 were “great buildings” by “great architects,” and non-downtown Manhattan neighborhoods had received short shrift. 206

Perhaps ironically, both Gans’ and Huxtable’s arguments applied to the Audubon Ballroom, further muddling the argument against its landmarking and preservation. It no doubt fulfilled Huxtable’s desire for aesthetic beauty and superiority. As for Gans’ perception of Huxtable’s argument, it was built by a “great architect” – Thomas Lamb -

204 As Dolores Hayden points out, Gans and Huxtable’s definitions of “vernacular” differed sharply. “When he said ‘vernacular’ he was classifying buildings by social use, referring to definitions of social class and accessibility, and implying tenements, sweatshops, saloons, and public bathhouses. When she said ‘vernacular,’ she meant that the architect was unknown, and the classification was by architectural style and/or typology,” a rather unusual definition of “vernacular.” Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 4.
by a “great man” – William Fox - for an elite class – the bourgeois whites who could afford movie palaces. It had also acquired immense social significance with the marginalized communities that ended up settled in the Ballroom’s neighborhood.

Often, landmarking and preservation was a (literally) surface level decision. In the early days of New York landmarking, in the 1960s through the 1980s, preservationists would present certain landmarks and buildings to the city council only to be met with the question, “Well, how can that be a landmark?” Anthony Tung pointed out how those with the final say would not, or could not, see “the relationship of the forms of the landmark to the deeper cultural meaning.”²⁰⁷ It had to look worthy of preserving; buildings associated primarily with marginalized people’s histories were not always the standard-bearers of architecture. This issue was not confined to the City Council: once, Michael Adams and C. Virginia Fields took newly appointed LPC head Laurie Beckelman on a tour through Harlem, as Beckelman had publicly called for the need to landmark more buildings in neighborhoods of color. The intended highlight of the tour was a building on 129th Street that A. Philip Randolph had commissioned as the headquarters of his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Not being the most impressive architectural site, when presented with it Beckelman said to a colleague, “They want us to landmark that?”²⁰⁸

While part of the issue was a racist elitism on what history was “worthy” of preservation, politicians, businessmen, and private individuals – who all shaped preservationists’ targets – also simply did not want landmarked buildings “getting in the way of their housing and economic development plans.”²⁰⁹ While Kathleen Mullinix and

²⁰⁷ Tung, Anthony M. Tung | NYPAP.
²⁰⁸ Johnson, “Landmarks Omission.”
²⁰⁹ Johnson.
Columbia provost Robert Goldberger did say that saving the Audubon Ballroom was still on the table, ultimately they believed that “What we’re doing is better than the Ballroom.” They did not believe the community would be fundamentally disturbed by its razing or Columbia expanding into their neighborhood.\textsuperscript{210} Obviously, the neighborhood disagreed.

Another cause of this lack of landmarking, some preservationists contended, was that there was little community outcry. Senator David Paterson’s then-chief of staff, Gina Stahlnecker, helped get the African Burial Ground landmarked after a long struggle and noted that there would be more landmarkable buildings “if there were huge grassroots groups.”\textsuperscript{211} Many in communities of color did want the economic boosts that new structures brought in. Preservationists have also always noted how community pressure makes it easier for cities to agree to landmark.\textsuperscript{212} Thomas Bess, then the director of the Historic District Council, argued that not only did the Audubon need to be saved but there was a desperate need to “form preservation advocacy groups north of 96th Street, because we, too, have a heritage.”\textsuperscript{213} Others viewed landmarking and preservation as a form of gentrification.\textsuperscript{214} While modern preservation standards and tactics emerged in the 1960s as a response to the bulldozer-renewal of planners like Moses, and much of it is

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\textsuperscript{210} Craiglow, “CU Likely to Build Lab on Audubon Ballroom Site.”
\textsuperscript{211} Johnson, “Landmarks Omission.”
\textsuperscript{212} Tung, Anthony M. Tung | NYPAP.
\textsuperscript{213} Adams, “Politicians Lead Fight to Save Audubon Ballroom.”
\textsuperscript{214} Robert Weyeneth discusses how the “historic preservation’s ground zero,” the Historic Charleston Foundation, not only set the blueprint for modern preservation but also were one of the first major forces of gentrification. It was, in fact, “a case study in displacement,” although it has made efforts to correct this. Weyeneth, \textit{Historic Preservation for a Living City: Historic Charleston Foundation 1947-1997}, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).
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done out of a genuine concern of history and community, it was still not infrequently a form of urban renewal, “a set of policies focused on increasing the value of urban land.”

Coupled with New York’s tendency to only landmark and preserve white-associated places, it is natural that some communities of color would be hesitant to support a preservationist movement.

Most preservationists recognize how difficult it can be to get somewhere landmarked, however. “People in that situation are just trying to do the best job they can and it’s hard to solve a lot of these things because sometimes you’re dealing with questions in which there isn’t a good answer,” Tung explains. As well, every landmarking ruling “has a potentially negative effect on someone’s life.” Perhaps you let down a community hoping to preserve a building or maybe the architect who planned to design the new building has now lost a commission. Part of the issue as well is that preservation organizations like the Landmarks Preservation Commission are inundated with potential new listings, dealing with thousands a year. Various organization leaders also choose how landmarks to pursue and set different standards – standards that could be

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216 A more recent study suggested that historic preservation in New York City did contribute to economic revitalization but also made neighborhoods “less accessible to lower-income residents.” Ingrid Gould Ellen & Brian J. McCabe, “Does Preservation Accelerate Neighborhood Change? Examining the Impact of Historic Preservation in New York City,” (*Journal of American Planning Association*, 82:2, 2016), 134-146. This is not always the case, however. In many cities like Chicago, Charleston, and even New York, preservation has often been used as a means to cease urban renewal and gentrification, especially in more recent decades. Lori Rotenberk, “Can Historic Preservation Cool Down a Hot Neighborhood?” *CityLab*, June 20, 2019; Weyeneth, *Historic Preservation for a Living City*.

217 Tung, Anthony M. Tung | NYPAP.
more conservative than others – that others within the organization have to follow, regardless of their own standards.

The Audubon, however, seemed to defy many of the common difficulties surrounding landmarking. There was mass community support for its preservation; its history was closely linked with Black, Latinx, Jewish, and ethnic white New York history; and its architectural beauty was beyond question. Thus, the concerted efforts against its preservation remained confounding. Michael Adams and others were similarly puzzled by the city’s inability to see the Audubon’s importance. As Adams argued, “It is important to recall the past through tangible relics so that we both remember the cost of our accomplishments, and avoid repeating ruinous mistakes. Neither Ford’s theatre where Lincoln was slain nor the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was assassinated is particularly distinguished architecturally – yet, because of what these structures mean to the history of the nation, each was rescued from developers concerned only with the history of their personal fortunes.”

Historic preservation focuses on maintaining a community’s sense of history and keeping the community together is as essential as the historic atmosphere. Robert Stipe has noted that preservation is important “because our historic resources are all that physically link us to our past. Some portion of that patrimony must be preserved if we are to recognize who we are, how we became so, and, most importantly, how we differ from others.” Physical heritage has become an integral part of its respective community. Saving people, communities, whole cities even, and not just buildings, is important to

Adams, “Politicians Lead Fight to Save Audubon Ballroom.”

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Similarly, Dolores Hayden argues that public spaces, urban landscapes, and buildings like the Audubon “can help to nurture [a] more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. Identity is intimately tied to memory.”220 As professional preservationists argued at the time, destroying the Audubon Ballroom not only would erase a prominent historic fixture, it would cause further tension between the Washington Heights community and Columbia University and the city. Indeed, the disruption of destruction “can be painful, for it robs us of memories and violates our sense of control. […] every groundbreaking shatters that benign illusion of ownership.”221 Barnard College Professor of Art History Donald Reynolds pointed out how much of the poorer parts of northern Manhattan had been torn down for “redevelopment,” so the neighborhood “doesn’t need any more destruction.”222 Its destruction would also only tarnish Columbia’s name further: “If the goal of a university is to educate, I’m not sure that the destruction of history does not constitute education [sic].”223

Many preservationists argued for the Ballroom’s salvation through its architectural beauty. The ballroom was, after all, a major work by Thomas Lamb, one of the most prominent American theater architect at the turn of the nineteenth century.224

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221 Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”
222 Kantrowitz, “FOCUS Say Goodbye to the Audubon Ballroom.”
223 Powe, “Letter to the Editor: Audubon Destruction.”
Herbert Muschamp pointed out that its exterior was “more than a historical artifact. It also endows the project with the ready-made elements of superb urban design.”

Preservationists also argued over the best way to preserve the Audubon. Donald Reynolds argued that the preservation and restoration of facades was “an important way to preserve history. If restoration does not destroy the original, incorporating old facades into new construction makes sense.” Indeed, facadism was popular among some historic preservationists, although what “facadism” meant was and still is contentious. Some, as with Main Street preservation programs, believe retaining the historic exterior is enough as it keeps the historic atmosphere of the community. Others argue that the interior floor plan must remain intact as well, with slight modifications. However, some preservationists like Bruce Fullem of the New York SHPO believed facadism was “false

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225 Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”
226 Kantrowitz, “FOCUS Say Goodbye to the Audubon Ballroom.”
Fullem argued that historic facades attached to modern buildings looked, frankly, dumb. The Audubon’s façade slapped on to the front of a massive concrete, steel, and glass complex would not retain the historic atmosphere, passers-by would not see it and believe it to contain – to use the National Register’s terms – historic integrity.

Michael Sovern had claimed that neither preservationists nor social activists had cared about saving the Audubon until the plans had been made public. However, it has only been recently that preservation has become a mostly proactive effort, partially in response to failures to save worthy landmarks in time. As well, it is clear that many individual preservationists were fighting for the ballroom from the jump, trying to convince New York City and their own bosses to do something, anything.

**The Dope Jam: Hip-Hop’s Response**

On June 28, 1988, the rap group Public Enemy – consisting of lead rapper Carlton “Chuck D” Ridenhour, hype man and instrumentalist William “Flavor Flav” Draytin, Jr., DJ Norman “Terminator X” Rogers, Richard Griffin aka Professor Griff the Minister of Information, and production team The Bomb Squad (Hank Schocklee and Keith Schocklee, Chuck D, Eric Sadler, and Gary G-Wiz) – released their second album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Selling half a million copies in the first month with barely any promotion, going platinum within the year, and receiving wild praise from critics and fans, Public Enemy’s sophomore effort propelled them to new levels of fame and helped cement them in hip-hop history. Tucked away on the album’s B-side was a future single, “Night of the Living Baseheads,” an anti-drug-selling anthem.

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227 Kantrowitz.
that discussed the crack epidemic and the unequal punishment faced by white and Black “junkies.” In mid-1990, PE put “Baseheads” out on its own with a music video, one whose primary backdrop was the Audubon Ballroom.

Formed by Chuck D and Flavor Flav in Long Island in 1985, Public Enemy (PE) quickly infused their rhymes and beats with the ideologies and speeches (as in, the actual recorded speeches) of the modern Black Power Movement. “Black culture’s prophets of rage,” they professed themselves the ideological heirs of Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and the Nation of Islam, especially Louis Farrakhan. In essence, Public Enemy were bringing Malcolm X to Generation X.228 Along with this nu-black power cultural program came, according to noted rap journalist Greg Tate, “rabble-rousing rage, radical aesthetics, and bootstrap capitalism, as well as a revival of the old movement’s less than humane tendencies: revolutionary suicide, misogyny, gaybashing, Jew-baiting, and the castigation of the white man as a genetic miscreant.”229 Still, regardless of their, as Robert Christgau puts it, sometimes inconsistent ideology, Public Enemy were “the chief reason second-generation B-boys adorn themselves with leather Africa medallions instead of dookie gold.”230 Their music, produced by the Bomb Squad and Terminator X, was funky, danceable, and hard – perfect for spreading Chuck D’s lyrical messages. With the loudest, deepest, and most booming voice in hip-hop history, Chuck D set his sights on the American government, white hegemonic power structures, drug-dealers, vapid

people, cops and the prison system – basically anything and everything that their Black Power forebears attacked.\textsuperscript{231}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{public_enemy_photo.png}
\caption{Photo of Public Enemy, unknown date. The SIWs are in the camo, Terminator X in the black jacket in the back, Flavor Flav in red, and Chuck D to the side. Deacon Chapin, "Photo of Public Enemy," Adler Hip Hop Archive, Cornell University Hip Hop Collection.}
\end{figure}

“Night of the Living Baseheads” and its music video provide an interesting cultural angle to analyze the debates surrounding the Audubon Ballroom. In \textit{Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America}, Tricia Rose analyzes “Baseheads” “Multilayered critique of several primary social narratives and institutions,” calling the song “one of rap music’s most extravagant displays of the tension between postmodern ruptures and the continuities of oppression.”\textsuperscript{232} The analysis presented here is deeply influenced by Rose’s but focuses exclusively on what the music

\textsuperscript{231} Whether one wants to argue about if Public Enemy “vulgarized” Malcolm in the same way Lenin noted Marx had been is something completely different. Hutchinson, “‘Malcolm X’ and the MTV Generation.”

video can say about the Audubon Ballroom, Columbia’s attempts to tear it down, and community resistance. This focus allows for a deeper analysis of the video, song-lyrics, and their context.\footnote{Black Noise was, in fact, my own introduction to the Audubon Ballroom and was the main inspiration for this paper. I am deeply indebted to Rose and her work.}

“Night of the Living Baseheads” opens with a black-and-white shot of Public Enemy standing over a gravestone labeled “R.I.P. Basehead” while a Khalid Abdul Muhammad speech plays overtop: “Have you forgotten that once we were brought here, we were robbed of our name, robbed of our language. We lost our religion, our culture, our God... And many of us, by the way we act, we even lost our minds.”\footnote{Khalid Muhammad, born Harold Moore, Jr., was a member of the Nation of Islam and New Black Panther Party. He was later removed from the Nation and censured by the US Congress after a 1993 speech where he called Jews “bloodsuckers” and advocated for the murder of white South Africans. In 1998, he organized the Million Youth March. He died of an aneurism in 2001.} From the beginning, PE raise the idea of Black culture being robbed and destroyed by white elites – just as the Audubon was being taken over and threatened with destruction. The video jumps to a news broadcast on “PETV” hosted by Flavor Flav and a Sherrelle Winters (portrayed by an actress). Winters announces they will explore the effects of the crack epidemic on the Black community, the same message as the song itself. This sets up PE, specifically Chuck D, as the on-the-ground reporters of Black life.\footnote{Chuck D has, in fact, famously called rap music “black America’s CNN.”}

The video then cuts from the news report to the scene of action: a group of beret-wearing militants – Public Enemy’s “paramilitary wing,” Security of the First World (S1Ws) - marching in front of the Audubon Ballroom, tagged in the video as “23 years later.” The ballroom is clearly decaying and covered in graffiti. The camera – filmed at a
very low angle, basically on the street – lingers on the Audubon for a brief second after the S1Ws march off screen before Chuck D and Professor Griff literally jump into frame. “Here it is! BAM! And you say ‘God Damn! this is the dope jam!’” He continues:

But let's define the term called dope
And you think it mean funky now, no
Here is a true tale
Of the ones that deal are the ones that fail (Yeah!)
Yeah, you can move if you wanna move
What it prove? It's here like the groove
The problem is this, we gotta' fix it
Check out the justice, and how they run it
Selling, smelling, sniffing, riffing
And brothers try to get swift and
Sell their own, rob a home
While some shrivel to bone
Like comatose walking around

As the song continues, the video cuts between Chuck in front of the Audubon, him in a dark alley surrounded by drugged up “zombies,” and the PE TV reports. These later shots of the Audubon now feature the S1Ws lined up in front of the ballroom and Flavor Flav dancing behind Chuck D. The S1Ws are now no longer just Public Enemy’s personal security detail but the defenders of the Audubon Ballroom.

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Another group present throughout the video is the so-called Brown Bag Movement, a bodega-style Ku Klux Klan with paper bags instead of robes. They are first shown protesting rap music and Public Enemy and eventually end up kidnapping Chuck D. Their placement in the video represents the continued white assault on Black culture, at the time most popularly represented by hip-hop music. Parroting popular conservative talking points at the time, the “representative” of the Brown Bags states to PETV that “all the rap noise and the violence associated with it is bringing our country to its knees.” The Audubon Ballroom, through its inclusion in the video, is a physical manifestation of this assault. The Brown Bags’ kidnapping of Chuck is a reflection of white attacks on African American legacies, and in 1988 one of the most prominent visuals of this attack was the Audubon. Columbia’s new biomedical center “would reinforce social commitment to life not yet formed and attempt to erase the symbolic meaning of the Ballroom as a critical moment in African-American protest and mobilization.”

To Public Enemy, the Audubon Ballroom is a physical manifestation of Malcolm X’s legacy in the same way that their music is a cultural continuity. By both protecting the Audubon and saving Chuck D from the Brown Bags, the Public Enemy militia pledge to protect Black culture, in all its forms, from white assault. By saving Chuck D they are in fact saving the Audubon Ballroom and the legacy of Malcolm X. At the same time, as Rose points out,

The Audubon Ballroom is a symbol of black protest and loss. Twenty-three years ago it was a site where ‘truth’ was spoken. But, today the Audubon is closed and gutted – Chuck cannot speak from its podium. Instead, he locates himself as close to the Audubon as he can possibly get and

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speaks through today’s primary communication medium – television.\textsuperscript{238}

Perhaps, by saving the Audubon, it again could again be used as a platform for change.

This connection was, in fact, no accident. Only two months before the video’s release, Chuck D and other rappers and activists participated in We Remember Malcolm Day at New York’s Abyssinian Baptist Church. Happening at the height of the Audubon protest movement, speakers included Reverend Calvin Butts, poet Haki Madhubuti, Lisa “Sister Souljah” Williamson, and Betty Shabazz. Many speakers “pointed out that the Audubon was a special place for African-American history and memory” and passed out a petition to stop Columbia’s project.\textsuperscript{239} Whether the “Baseheads” video had already been filmed or if this event inspired PE to film at the Audubon, clearly they were throwing their weight against further attempts of white hegemonic powers to demolish yet another artifact of African American life.

The main subject of “Night of the Living Baseheads,” however, is drug dealers. Chuck D was an outspoken critic of drug-use and PE attacked Black people who sold drugs to their “own” communities. In their eyes, Black drug dealers and users were killing themselves at the same time they were being destroyed from outside by white capitalism that sold African Americans unhealthy substances, demolished their homes and cultural centers, and denied them access to basic rights. The video, reflecting the lyrics, shows not only African Americans falling victim to the drug epidemic but exposes whites politicians, businessmen, and bourgeois as “baseheads,” too. Fellow rapper Lana “MC Lyte” Moorer, working as a PETV reporter, breaks into a generic “Executive Board

\textsuperscript{238} Rose, 119.
\textsuperscript{239} Rose, 122.
Room,” where the all-white board members are caught on camera scrambling to hide their table covered in coke. Later, the video briefly cuts to a screen showing a graffitied skull with the phrase “Crack House / White House.” PE connects white capitalism and the federal government (specifically the Reagan-Bush administration) to the drug trade specifically and the destruction of the Black community generally.\textsuperscript{240} Black drug dealers can perhaps be rehabilitated in Chuck D’s mind (“Stop illin’ and killing, stop grillin’” to which a chorus responds “We are willing!”) but white peddlers are beyond saving. By placing the image of the Audubon with this discourse on the destruction of the Black community, PE ties these two existential crises together.

![Image](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyR09SP9qdA&t=91s)

*Figure 4.7. Public Enemy, "Night of the Living Baseheads," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyR09SP9qdA&t=91s*

The political connections can go further. Chuck D’s main beef with Black drug dealers is how they are apparently betraying their own community. Similarly, some Black activists, Chuck D included, felt betrayed by David Dinkins’ – New York City’s first African American mayor – rather “race-neutral” policies and public appearance. At the moment of “Baseheads,” as has been discussed, Dinkins was making little effort to save

\textsuperscript{240} Chuck D and Public Enemy have referenced in other songs the popular idea that the CIA and Reagan administration were in fact the ones who released crack into Black neighborhoods.
the Audubon, a site associated with one of Dinkins’ apparent heroes. Indeed, “Baseheads,” like *It Takes a Nation* and the rest of Public Enemy’s collective discography, is an assault on the federal and local governments and the so-called Black “sell-outs” who seemed to buy into the “system.”

Hip-hop culture took a more direct role in the Audubon Movement in other ways. For example, on April 19, 1991, Columbia University’s Black Students Organization (BSO) also sponsored a benefit concert to help fund the opposition against the biomedical center. The benefit concert’s line-up was a veritable who’s-who of local, upcoming, alternative hip-hop artists: the concert featured Brand Nubian, Rappin’ Is Fundamental, MC Trouble, Jaz, and members of Poor Righteous Teachers and X-Clan. So popular was the idea that the BSO and their chair Hector Carter had to reject many other performers. 241 Harry Belafonte and Public Enemy were reportedly invited, although it appears they turned it down or could not make it. 242 The Columbia College Student Council allocated $471 for the concert, which cost around $1,500 in total. 243 Columbia College Assistant Dean of Students William Wiggins doubted the concert’s efficacy in changing any of Columbia’s or New York’s plans, but believed it was still important “for

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individuals and organizations to express their feelings about the demolition of most of the ballroom” through the concert.\textsuperscript{244}

The performers of this concert represented a slice of the burgeoning alternative hip-hop movement, which promoted more conscious and political lyricism opposed to the more popular gangster rap like NWA, Ice-T, and Schoolly D. Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions were massive influences on this movement to be sure, but alternative hip-hop shied away from their more outlandish militancy and followed the more cerebral work of groups like Eric B & Rakim, De La Soul, the Jungle Brothers, and A Tribe Called Quest as well as political proto-rappers like Gil-Scot Heron and the Last Poets. This movement comprised a rather wide range of styles, from New York rappers and hip-hop groups like Queen Latifah, Brand Nubian, X-Clan, the Poor Righteous Teachers, Movement X, and Paris to southerners Arrested Development and West Coasters like the Pharcyde and Digital Underground. Rhetorically indebted to the Nation of Islam – and, paradoxically, both Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan – the Black Panther Party, and more contemporary figures like Jesse Jackson and Sonny Carson, alternative hip-hoppers spoke about anti-racism and Black nationalism and pride generally. More specifically, they touched on slavery, crime, the AIDS and crack epidemics, self-defense, education, unity, and police brutality.\textsuperscript{245} Although on occasion they promoted anti-sexist arguments – and this was generally reserved for female rappers like Latifah – this community still fell prey to chauvinism, homophobia, and capitalist tendencies.

\textsuperscript{244} Wiggins, for his part, had previously expressed support for preserving as much of the Ballroom as possible and also worried about the biomedical center’s possible harm of the local community. Moody, “BSO to Sponsor Concert to Help Audubon Opposition.”

The most famous – both at the time and still today – of the performers of the Audubon Benefit was Brand Nubian. Brand Nubian was founded in New Rochelle, New York, in 1989 by rappers Maxwell “Grand Puba” Dixon, Derek “Sadat X” Murphy, and Lorenzo “Lord Jamar” Dechalus and their DJ, DJ Alamo. Their debut 1990 album, One for All, received critical acclaim – including premier hip-hop magazine The Source’s coveted five-out-of-five mic review – mixed Nation of Islam and Five Percenter teachings with playful sexuality and intricate wordplay.

The Poor Righteous Teachers and X-Clan were close affiliates of Brand Nubian, performing very similar militant Afrocentric hip-hop. These two groups never quite reached Brand Nubian’s level of popularity but received similar acclaim from music critics and rap fans. X-Clan was formed in Brooklyn in 1989 by Jason “Brother J” Hunter, Anthony “Sugar Shaft” Hardin, Claude “Paradise” Grey, and Lumumba “Professor X” Carson – son of Sonny Carson. Sonny was a constant presence in the group, which Brother J later calling him “the grand master in our house.” Carson heavily influenced his son and the Clan’s entire political perception, and they modeled their movement – Blackwatch – after his December 12th Movement. Even without the benefit concert, it seems likely X-Clan would have gotten involved with the Audubon Movement due to these connections. They released their debut album, To the East, Blackwards, in 1990. Full of Afrocentrism, anti-racism, and ancient Egyptian religions, the album received critical acclaim but did not sell particularly well. In fact, the group often received more attention for their wild shows, garb, and rather uninhibited

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outspokenness than their music before their break-up in 1995. Poor Righteous Teachers were formed in Trenton, New Jersey, by rappers Culture Freedom and Timothy “Wise Intelligent” Grimes and producer Father Shaheed. They stressed their religious belief and philosophy, heavily inspired by Nation of Islam splinter group the Nation of Gods and Earths or Five-Percenters. Their debut album, *Holy Intellect*, also released in 1990 but did not receive the same attention as fellow Black nationalist albums like *To the East*, Brand Nubian’s *One For All*, or Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet*. However, it still received critical acclaim, and Wise Intelligent’s dense, creative lyrical styles were widely praised.

The other performers were slightly less known, for various reasons. MC Trouble, born LaTasha Rogers, was an apparent up-and-comer, being the first female rapper signed to Motown Records. She had a slight hit in 1990 with “(I Wanna) Make You Mine,” followed by her album *Gotta Get a Grip*. Her album blended rap with R&B stylings and the song “Black Line” proved she could be as politically coherent as her concert peers when she wanted. Before she could further her success, she died of a seizure on June 4, 1991, at age 20. Rappin’ Is Fundamental was a Brooklyn-based rap crew formed by producer Osten “Easy Mo Bee” Harvey, Jr. with some neighborhood friends. The group interestingly mixed funk-based hip-hop with a cappella and doo-wop. Their 1991 self-titled debut completely flopped, however, and they were dropped by their label. Mo Bee, who had already produced popular records with Ultramagnetic MCs, LL Cool J, and Big Daddy Kane, would go on to work with Miles Davis, Notorious B.I.G., and 2Pac, among countless other artists.
The Audubon Ballroom clearly meant a lot to New York’s young, Black hip-hop artists. These rappers in their music and actions attempted to take up the Black Power mantle, to bring the legacies of Malcolm X and Huey Newton back to pop culture consciousness. Some, like Public Enemy, succeeded a great deal; others, like the Poor Righteous Teachers, simply remained underground darlings for a few years. Regardless, these artists all threw their weight and whatever political and cultural clout they could behind the Audubon and against Columbia University and New York City.

1990 Compromise and Final Construction

In late 1990, a powerful ally emerged on the side of the Save the Audubon Movement – Ruth Messinger. Born and raised in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a student of Brearley School and Radcliffe College, Messinger had long been a “staunch voice for tenants, for children, for the homeless and the poor.”\(^{247}\) In the 1970s and early 80s she had been a supporter of the Attica revolt, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and not-quite-socialist mayoral candidate Frank Barbaro. She represented the Upper West Side on City Council from 1978 to 1989 before being elected as Manhattan Borough President.

On August 3, Messinger sent a letter to Port Authority director Frank Garcia stating their funds could not be used towards the Audubon Research Park Project. Citing a rather obscure law, Messinger was able to veto up to $8.1 million from the Port Authority, forcing the city to renegotiate and come up with a new plan. She argued that the project cost $9 million more than budgeted “and neither Columbia University nor the City has expressed willingness to assume that burden.” Columbia also had not provided

information on construction employment, especially whether this employment would be equal opportunity and localized. Any future plans would have to include “at or near prime rate” interests for Columbia and any businesses residing on the site, include local employment, research on the site would have to contain “specific plans and programs to foster the development of locally-based businesses,” and – most importantly – as much of the Audubon as possible had to be saved and rehabilitated.\textsuperscript{248} Weeks of community pressure and city debate seemed to have finally paid off.

Messinger’s veto initially drew harsh criticism from the plan’s most prominent supporters. Dinkins, Betty Shabazz, Congressmen Charles Rangel, State Senator Franz Leichter, and various local newspapers were all reportedly annoyed by her decision and the further delay it created.\textsuperscript{249} Many likely did not want to spend the extra cash on rehabilitating the façade, preferring to demolish the whole building and be done with it. Others argued that protesters would never be satisfied, especially now that they had found a voice in Ruth Messinger.\textsuperscript{250} Columbia Director of Project Development and Coordination H. Bernhard Haeckel had publicly worried her veto would “wipe out more than seven years of careful planning.”\textsuperscript{251} It is possible that Messinger’s role in the compromise had more long-term effects on her career. In 1997, Messinger was the Democratic candidate running for mayor against Rudy Giuliani. She lost, receiving only 40.7 percent of the vote and 47.1 percent of her native Manhattan, and Michael Adams

\textsuperscript{250} “How Not to Honor Malcolm X.”
\textsuperscript{251} Lee, “New Compromise Saves Audubon, Biomed Center.”
believes that it was her standing against the Columbia-City hegemony that lost her a lot of political favor.\textsuperscript{252}

Despite these objections, a new compromise was finalized on August 22. In a lengthy Board of Estimate session that ran until 1:15 A.M., city officials unanimously agreed on a new, $37.5 million project.\textsuperscript{253} The entirety of the ballroom’s terra-cotta façade would be preserved along with 55 percent of the interior, including the stage where Malcolm X was killed – a decision especially desired by Betty Shabazz. The site was also required to include a Malcolm X memorial, a health care facility, and local “minority and women-owned businesses” hired for construction. The San Juan Theatre, however, would still have to be demolished.\textsuperscript{254} The project now cost approximately $11.1 million, higher than the $9 million price-tag Messinger had rejected. Messinger herself pledged $4 million of her own personal discretionary fund – $900,000 was to be used for the preservation of the ballroom and the remainder for the rehabilitation of its façade. Mayor Dinkins also promised $7.1 million alongside the original $26.5 million derived from the city, Columbia, and the Public Development Corporation. Haeckel also clarified that their money would not come out of the university’s tuition.\textsuperscript{255}

Despite some initial critiques, both sides emerged out of the compromise relieved and overjoyed. Dinkins was mostly relieved for the plans to finally moved forward stating, “It is gratifying that we are able to preserve such a significant portion of this

\textsuperscript{252} Adams, Michael Henry Adams | NYPAP.
\textsuperscript{254} “Audubon Ballroom.”
historic facility while enabling this important economic development project.” While Michael Adams initially called the compromise a “travesty” because “it would be better for them to destroy everything than to save a few relic-like fragments,” he later recognized how incredible Messinger’s feat had been. As well, he believed that visitors seeing this architectural and historic wonder split in half for a parking lot was the biggest indictment of the city and Columbia he could imagine. Laurie Beckelman was pleased with the deal but regretted that LPC had never held a hearing. Herbert Muschamp argued that the compromise and the new promised building not only memorialized Malcolm but the “ideal of difference that can transcend common ground,” the ability for communities to organize effectively and put successfully pressure on institutes of power. Some, however, bemoaned Columbia’s lack of role in the negotiations. Unable to not find a part in solving a crisis they caused, Columbia missed a valuable opportunity to fix their own reputation. Students called on the university to be more involved in Malcolm X education at the Audubon Research Center, “uphold its end of the bargain to the people of Washington Heights,” and hopefully learn from the experience.

Construction on the new Audubon Research Complex began in late 1991 and continued through the decade. As promised, the façade of the ballroom was rehabilitated along with the Grand Ballroom’s stage. The exterior and interior rehabilitation was led by architect John Torborg, a “painstaking work of urban archeology.” Herbert Muschamp

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257 Adams, Michael Henry Adams | NYPAP.
258 Beckelman, Laurie Beckelman | NYPAP.
259 Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”
260 “No Thanks to Columbia.”
noted that “Heinrich Schliemann didn’t lavish nearly so much care on his beloved
Troy.” Using only a small historic photograph, Susan Quimby recreated and sculpted
the head of Neptune on the terra-cotta façade above the entrance that had been destroyed
years prior. Max Bond remained in charge of the modern half’s design, now assisted
by Lewis Davis. To marry the two halves of the Research Complex – the historic and the
modern – Bond and Davis approached research from two directions reflecting each
portion’s intended use: “The memorial will unearth the past, while, upstairs, lab workers
will explore the future.” The six-story research lab that rose behind the façade
harmonized with Lamb’s original design but did not emulate the style. While clearly
modern with its concrete and glass, ninety-degree angles, and tower massing, the
“window mullions echo Lamb’s” while the green and gray palette of the ballroom was
retained for the Research Center. Muschamp, while acknowledging the pain changes to
the ballroom brought to the community, noted that the design by Davis and Bond was of
the highest sensitivity.

Although the Messinger compromise apparently answered the all-important
question of “who’s funding this?” in the mid-1990s, the Research Center’s construction
still seemed to require more funding. The rest of the five-building complex still required
more cash, as seen by the Sherman Fairchild foundation’s $10 million grant to begin
construction of the Center for Disease Prevention building in 1994. This was the second
building of the complex to begin construction, located on the corner of St. Nicolas

\[\text{\footnotesize 261 Referencing that archeologist’s years-long excavation of what he believed to be the infamous Troy in the 1870s and 80s. Muschamp.}
262 James Renner, “AUDUBON BALLROOM,” August 6, 2008,
263 Muschamp, “Once and Future Audubon.”]
By 1995, the memorial to Malcolm X in the original Audubon Ballroom was still incomplete and, in fact, not even funded. “Somehow,” said Howard Dodson of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “millions of dollars were appropriated for the buildings and no funds were appropriated for the specific activities within it. I’m sure eventually there will be a memorial.”

Even in the best of circumstances, Malcolm’s memory still seemed to take second-place to the city. The memorial was eventually completed by the end of the decade: a life-size bronze statue of Malcolm was designed and installed by Gabriel Koren; a large mural depicting his life was finished by California artist Daniel Galvez in 1997; and the stage was partially preserved and partially rebuilt (due to rot).

Student protests continued, however. These protests both rejected that Columbia had the right to destroy any part of the Audubon and worried about the Research Center’s focus on biotechnology and possible toxins being released into the community. Around 45 Black and Latinx students – mostly members of the Black Consciousness Movement – held a sit-in protest at the Audubon on November 5, 1990. They demanded the Audubon center be converted into “an international multi-cultural center geared to the study of revolutionary philosophies and strategies,” are more worthy legacy of Malcolm X’s legacy. They wished to speak with Mayor Dinkins about their wishes, although he and other city officials effectively ignored them.

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264 Zweiter, “Sherman Grant Funds Audubon $10 Million Donation to Aid Construction of New Building.”
265 Rozhon, “Research Park Rising on Site of Audubon Ballroom.”
More newsworthy, however, was the 100 student blockade of Columbia’s Hamilton Hall on December 14, 1992.\textsuperscript{268} While the demands of this protest were less defined – or, at least, not as well reported – than previous ones, it was clear that they also believed any destruction of the Audubon represented a destruction of the legacy of Malcolm X, an attack on Black and Latinx lives, and the research center represented “a national syndrome of locating environmentally hazardous sites in minority areas.” The main target of this blockade was Columbia College Dean Jack Greenberg – former Director-Counsel of the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund and co-counsel for \textit{Brown v. Board of Education}. Involving members of the Save the Audubon Coalition, the Barnard-Columbia Earth Coalition, and the December 12\textsuperscript{th} Movement, the student group knocked on Dean Greenberg’s door to see him, but he refused to meet with more than a handful of students - “I won’t meet with a mob” – although eventually he agreed to meet with them all around 7 P.M. After his initial rejection in the early afternoon, the protesters then joined arms to prevent anyone from entering or exiting the building until Greenberg had at least listened to them. Professors had to either cancel or reschedule classes. After being informed that their actions violated the University’s Rules of Conduct, the students added amnesty to their list of demands. For his part, Greenberg rejected a call of amnesty, stating he did not believe in it: “Martin Luther King, Jr. felt that the essence of civil disobedience was that when you broke the law, you pay the penalty.” He also denied having any influence on the Audubon plans, although he did not oppose them. Greenberg was reportedly calm throughout but did lose his temper when questioned about his fidelity to the movement he had been a part of in the 1950s and 60s. He was eventually

\textsuperscript{268} Certainly not the first time Hamilton had been blockaded by students.
allowed to leave but protests continued in the building and on the street until police in riot gear appeared to arrest them, forcing them to disperse.²⁶⁹

The students involved in this protest faced harsh punishment, some of the harshest Columbia had presented in years. Over twenty students received letters around December 18th, Columbia’s exam time, to appear before the Associate Provost and Rules Administrator, Stephen Rittenberg, and faced up to seven simple violations of University rules with many facing six additional expulsion-worthy violations. The Columbia Daily Spectator noted that these were the most stringent punishments faced by students since 1987 – also for a blockade in Hamilton Hall, this one in protest of a racist attack of several Black students by four white students.²⁷⁰ The students were identified through videotapes recorded by Columbia security – an action that led to the harassment of New York Post and CDS reporters by students who thought they were security as well.²⁷¹ The students were to hire lawyers outside of Columbia and Rittenberg promised to deal with each case individually, further asking them to reach a settlement rather than pursue a hearing. A settlement would be much less likely of resulting in a suspension. Noah Potter, Ben Jealous, and the other students asked Rittenberg to reschedule the visit to late January, citing exams and giving the students time to obtain counsel and plan.²⁷² Jealous

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²⁷¹ Halikman and Stanton, “Hamilton Blockaded in Protest of Audubon Plans”; Lee, “Students Face Possible Expulsion for Blockade.”
²⁷² Potter, “Columbia Policies Value the Bottom Line over Human Rights.”
stated that many of them were students of low means on financial aid, so they would require additional assistance. Their requests were either denied or ignored. Seven students chose to the hearing, tried on February 23, 1993. Although no violence occurred, charges included preventing faculty and students from accessing or leaving Hamilton, refusing to identify themselves to campus security, and failing to disperse. These Columbia Seven argued that not only were the Conduct Rules not entirely fair, but the hearing was not either. The university was represented by a high-end law firm while the students had to attract pro bono work with no assistance of their own. Although Dr. Tim Brooks – a former president of the Association of Student Judicial Affairs and then dean of students at Delaware University – did not think Columbia, as a private university, had to follow the same due-process requirements as public colleges, he noted that this was “a trend among college officials across the country to toughen disciplinary measures against students […] a reaction to widespread unrest at college campuses during the 1960’s and 70’s.” In the end, four of the students – Jealous, Todd Chretien, Peter Wilson, and Andrew Pollack – were suspended for one semester. However, the hearing’s judge, Federal judge Harold R. Tyler, criticized the university’s rules as “inflexible,” urging the students to appeal.

Moises Perez, meanwhile, continued fighting for Alianza Dominica and the greater Dominican community to have a space of their own from the land that had

273 Lee, “Students Face Possible Expulsion for Blockade.”
275 Newman.
formerly been their community center. Columbia had promised that Alianza would have the right to develop, as they saw fit, the triangular piece of land bordered by St. Nicholas, Audubon Avenue, and 166th along with their own community base in the new Audubon center for Dominican and Latinx community services. Columbia also promised that Alianza would be allowed to help with the employment.

Perez and Alianza quickly realized, however, that there was more to this than it seemed. As he recalled, Columbia “claimed all sorts of things. Bullshit things” and they “put up enormous barriers.” The employment-promise never went through. Columbia told them they could never actually own the land, it would be leased for twenty-years, and the lease took around two years to even negotiate. In order to get their land developed, Perez had to get the written approval of every elected official in the borough – certainly a process for anyone familiar with politics. He did, eventually, but the most stringent holdout was, unfortunately, Guillermo Linares, the first Dominican elected to public office in New York City. Perez and Alianza also quickly realized they did not have “the wherewithal” to develop the land they had been leased. It cost “infinitely more than what we had in the budget […] but I went ferociously” and Columbia refused to assist with any of their own massive wealth. Perez hired Max Bond to design the building – and the final product indeed looks like the modern Audubon complex. After negotiations finished, the building took over a decade to finish, with Columbia delaying the project throughout. During construction, they learned why Columbia had been willing

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277 Moises Perez had to promise Linares a piece of the action and ownership of the land to get his approval. Even then, Linares did not give his approval. He only relented when Perez flexed his community status and told him, “I will be up your ass for a really long time. […] I earned this shit, and you’re not going to get in the way.”
to give up the land: it had formerly been the site of a gas station. The land was poor and construction released horrific fumes throughout the surrounding blocks. Although Columbia had known about the gas, Alianza ended up having to pay for a company to clean the land. Throughout all this, Perez – who had not totally trusted Columbia and the city to begin with – realized that the community had been completely correct. Trying to stop or even slightly mitigate the immense power of an Ivy League school was “like stopping an avalanche with a snowboard.”

Figure 4.8. The Audubon Business and Technology Center and Shabazz Center today. “Audubon Ballroom,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Audubon_Ballroom

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278 Perez, interview.
Figure 4.9. The Alianza Dominicana Triangle Building. View from intersection of 165th and St. Nicholas, facing north. Google Maps, accessed November 7, 2020, https://www.google.com/maps/@40.8385334,-73.9398765,3a,75y,25.97h,88.68t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s_C1oWkQkGUhxmrxA85Phyw!2e0!7i16384!8i8192
Chapter 5: Epilogue

“Cuz if you really wasn’t choosin’ your side, somebody choosin’ your fate, cuz the system don’t fight fair, guerillas don’t fight fair, it’s warfare everywhere. Look, it’s right there, in the gated communities, they hatin’ on you and me.”

- M-1, “Audubon Ballroom” by Black Market Militia

On May 19, 2005, what would have been Malcolm X’s eightieth birthday, the (partially) rehabilitated Audubon Ballroom reopened to the public as the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Education Center. The research center had meant to open in the mid-1990s but faced constant delays. Betty Shabazz was leading the effort but Rudy Giuliani’s administration refused to much of anything. Shabazz died on June 23, 1997, from an accidental fire started in her apartment by her grandson. After her death “the idea sat on a shelf,” according to the family’s lawyer, Joseph Fleming. However, renewed efforts by the Shabazz family and Manning Marable – celebrated historian of African American history and professor at Columbia – led to the Center’s remodeling and opening. Using rent money from the Chase Bank that sat in one of the lots, Marable and the family added informative computer kiosks and video screens in the alcoves that had formerly advertised the Audubon’s vaudeville acts. Three of Malcolm and Betty’s daughters, Malaak, Gamilah, and Ilyasah Shabazz, were among nearly 400 who gathered

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at the new Audubon Ballroom for a pre-opening memorial on February 21, the fortieth anniversary of Malcolm’s murder. For Malaak, Ilyasah, Gamilah, and Benjamin Kareem - formerly Benjamin 2X, Malcolm’s assistant minister who had brought Malcolm on stage just before he was murdered – this was the first time they had returned to the Audubon since that day.  

Meanwhile, their failure to completely demolish the Audubon did not dissuade Columbia from further encroachment policies. In 2006, the University planned to expand its campus “into seventeen acres of West Harlem.”  

David Dinkins was once again involved, supporting the plan – this time as a Columbia professor.  

Harlem rallied again, and Columbia students joined again, but the university had more tools at its disposal. The Supreme Court ruled in *Kelo vs. City of New London* (2005) that private entities could use eminent domain to take land from a private owner if put to “economic development.”  

Columbia advertised in the *Amsterdam News* and launched “astroturf” campaigns with vague, progressive sounding names like “The Coalition for the Future of Manhattanville” to convince residents to go along with the plan.  

Columbia had its way in the end, buying land in Manhattanville and erasing West Harlem’s vernacular architectural landscape for Business School buildings and science centers.  

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283 Rhodes-Pitts, 281.  
today remains New York City’s largest private landowner, with 206 properties as of 2016, and the second largest in terms of pure square-footage.\textsuperscript{287}

The Audubon fight’s major players have continued to fight for racial equity in urban politics and historic preservation. Michael Henry Adams continues to fight against African American exclusion, especially in museum curatorship. He published the award-winning \textit{Harlem: Lost and Found} in 2001 and has continued to write about Black and gay expression in New York architecture and interior design. Not slowed by a paltry suspension, Ben Jealous later went on to serve as the president and CEO of the NAACP from 2008 to 2013. He also ran an unsuccessful bid for governor of Maryland in 2018 and has also been a senior member of Kapor Capital and the Center for American Progress. Ruth Messinger ran an unsuccessful mayoral campaign against Rudy Guiliani in 1997, where her rather liberal history apparently backfired. She was the president and CEO of the American Jewish World Service from 1998 to 2016 and has been involved with various progressive, international Jewish organizations. Omowale Clay continues to work with the December 12\textsuperscript{th} Movement. They continue to organize solidarity marches for various international causes dealing with Black people, including recent protests to defund the NYPD, enact reparations for slavery, and end sanctions on nations like Zimbabwe.

Finally, Moises Perez continues his non-profit work in Washington Heights with Alianza and the Workforce, Community, and Government Relations department of SOMOS Community Care, a New York-based network providing health care to lower-income communities throughout New York City. Under Perez’s leadership, Alianza has grown to be one of the largest community organizations in the city with million-dollar annual programs. In 2001, they led the relief efforts to hundreds of grieving Dominican families who had lost relatives – “few protected by pension plans or corporate benefits” - in the World Trade Center attack on September 11 and the crash of Flight 587 – the local Dominican community’s most popular flight from New York City to the Dominican Republic – on November 12.\(^\text{288}\)

The Audubon Ballroom provides an example of how communities – especially poor communities or communities of color – in America can be besieged by institutions purporting to protect them or promote progressive policies. The desire by city governments and powerful private institutions like universities to demolish entire neighborhoods in the paradoxical name of “development” reflects the continued colonialist hierarchies that dominate American past and present. Ostensibly rooted in Cedric Robinson’s idea racial capitalism, which extracts economic and social value from people of color whose entire identities, cultures, and histories are simultaneously denigrated, urban development and “renewal” schemes such as those surrounding the Audubon Ballroom show how disparate racial and class-based inequities remained through the end of the twentieth century (and well into the twenty-first). However, this moment also conveys the growing ability of marginalized communities to articulate their

\(^{288}\) Finn, “PUBLIC LIVES.”
own oppression and fight against it, even successfully. The Save the Audubon Movement was not one defined by leaders but by mass-movements and community-based resistance. This mass-movement, one joined by preservationists, hip-hoppers, and students, was a continuation of the older Civil Rights Movement and showed that it still had clout, enough to put pressure more powerful institutions. A story generally under-told until now, the Audubon can perhaps provide even modern social and preservationist movements.
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