Like many Western youth and pop cultures before, hip-hop found the loopholes in the Iron Curtain and, starting in 1983, also spread throughout the German Democratic Republic. When West German radio stations like the Sender Freies Berlin (SFB), the Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR2), and the Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR2) played rap music in their charts, East German youngsters tuned in and were turned on by the sounds they could hear. Similarly, breakdance performances of the Rock Steady Crew and the New York City Breakers on West German TV shows hosted by Thomas Gottschalk and Hans-Joachim Fuchsberger helped many later b-boys pick up their first moves. They enthusiastically took part in the cultural transfer of rap, b-boys, DJing, and graffiti into the GDR, creating their own world of hip-hop east of the Iron Curtain. When Harry Belafonte's movie Beat Street (1983) premiered in the GDR on June 14, 1985, only a year after its release in France, Great Britain, and West Germany, the hip-hop scene there really started to flourish.

Various state actors, including state and party representatives, functionaries of the party youth organization, Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ, Free German Youth), as well as the police and officers of the GDR Ministry for State Security (MfS, or Stasi), reacted with alarm to this new youth cultural phenomenon and attempted to bring it under their control. They relied on three strategies: First, the police and MfS enforced a ban on any unauthorized public hip-hop performances—b-boys and rapping on the streets, in passages, and in underpasses were strictly prohibited, just as scrawling graffiti was; any youth apprehended in the act would face interrogation at the police station. Second, to draw so-called hip-hop heads away from the street, the cultural bureaucracy resorted to a well-tried system of licensing and rating for hip-hop culture that allowed b-boys, rappers, and DJs (though not graffiti artists) to practice in sponsored training facilities and officially earn money for public performances. Yet although this appeared to be a system to support and encourage the practice of hip-hop, it also aimed to control and curb it. Every artist had to apply to rating and licensing commissions, which disciplined and mainstreamed hip-hop culture.

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1 In 1973, African-American and Puerto Rican teenagers from the New York City South Bronx invented new styles of dancing, making music, and painting on walls. Their practices of b-boysing (a.k.a. breakdancing), spray-painting graffiti, DJing, and MCing (a.k.a. rapping), which came to be known as hip-hop, emerged as youth cultural expressions to function as both pastime activities and powerful voices of protest against racism, oppression, and exploitation. Starting in 1979, with the release of the first rap record called Rapper's Delight by the Sugarhill Gang, hip-hop gained more and more presence in the media all over the United States. While this transition from youth culture to popular culture tremendously changed hip-hop, it also set it into motion to spread throughout the world. Thus, only ten years after its birth, one could listen to British artists spinning their records and rapping their rhymes, watch young b-boys dancing in France, and look at walls covered with graffiti in Munich, Hamburg, and Dortmund. For research and accounts regarding the birth of hip-hop, see, e.g., Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, Music/Culture (Hanover, NH, 1994); David Toop, The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop (Boston, 1984); Grandmaster Flash and David Ritz, The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash: My Life, My Beats (New York, 2008).
for the socialist cultural landscape by imposing the categories of Volkskunst (Folk Art) and Unterhaltungskunst (Entertainment) on it. Third, the state attempted to replace the American cultural products needed for performing hip-hop that were entering the GDR despite all border controls with things made in the GDR. For example, the state-owned Amiga record label released the album Elektrik Boogie (1985) by composer Arnold Fritzsch in the hope that b-boys and DJs would breakdance and mix with this socialist music. In this way, the functionaries in charge of cultural policies wanted to counteract the American commodities’ appeal to East German youth.2

These three strategies designed to bind youth to socialism and control their practice of breakdance, rap, DJing, and graffiti essentially backfired. The hip-hop heads, after tuning in and being turned on by these new forms of cultural expression, dropped out of the state-sanctioned hip-hop scene and continued to develop their own. While they lived within the state they felt was confining them, they broke out of it on an imaginary level every time they rocked their bodies, spun their records, spat their rhymes, and spray-painted walls. In the following, I will illustrate how the performance of GDR hip-hop culture functioned as a form of imaginary and temporary Republikflucht, or flight from the GDR. I will focus on the consumption and production of rap music and on hip-hop fashion in the GDR, paying attention not only to the material objects involved in these processes, but also to the economic constraints state socialism imposed on them.

Why things matter

Hip-hop is material culture—now probably more than ever. But even in its beginnings, hip-hop relied on things: spray cans, vinyl records, turntables, shoes, boom boxes, etc. As I will show, hip-hop artists play with many items of material culture, appropriating them for their own purposes and not as the items were originally intended to be used—e.g., using a microphone not to amplify the human voice but to create percussive sounds (known as beatboxing); or playing a vinyl record on two turntables, mixing and cutting back and forth, and scratching the vinyl with the needle to make noisy and zipping sounds.

Materials transport certain ideas. Or, to be more precise, the way people use things creates meaning. In hip-hop, these appropriating practices assign new meanings to existing things. A baseball cap turned backwards may signify its bearer’s protest against the fashion industry that prescribes how to wear it; a microphone used

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for beatboxing may stand for hip-hop’s creativity to be able to make something with almost nothing—a mouth and a microphone connected to a sound system substitutes for a whole (and expensive) drum set; and spray cans may be regarded as the postmodern artist’s set of brushes, with walls and trains embodying the new easels.

Over time, things become laden with layers of meaning according to their different uses. These layers of meaning constitute a thing’s “aura,” as Walter Benjamin puts it, which, when we account for its history, makes it close to us as a tangible object, but also far away from us since it refers to things that happened in its past. It is not primarily the present use value of things that is of importance for historical analysis but rather their symbolic value—what they stand for, or, in Krzysztof Pomian’s words, the “invisible” they point to. Apart from the written texts that serve as sources for historians, things form important complementary testimonies about historical actors’ practices through the meanings with which they were invested and the specific uses they had.

In the cultural transfers of hip-hop in the GDR, things perceived as “American”—and with them, the ideas and ideals of this African-American expressive culture—found their way into socialism. However, some things that were required to create hip-hop in the US and other Western countries did not make it through the tightly sealed border, the Iron Curtain. Only their images and use values were broadcast, and this transfer of ideas sufficed as an incentive for East German teenagers to start copying, recreating, and appropriating hip-hop with their own means. Given this transcultural context, how should we categorize both the commodities they consumed from the West and the material objects they made themselves in the East? Are they socialist (whatever that means), German, American? Socialist, because they were appropriated under conditions of a socialist state and party set; typically German, because they were transferred in the peculiar dynamics of the German–German relationship during the Cold War; or American, because the objects, ideas, and practices stemmed from across the Atlantic? To what extent are these Germans’ things not so German after all, and, conversely, to what extent have American things been made German in this process of cultural transfer?

**Boom boxes—Consuming and producing rap music**

In order to analyze hip-hop music in East Germany, it is necessary to explain how this music is typically produced and consumed,
including the technique of sampling and the dynamic this generates for creating a new musical aesthetic. Only against this backdrop can the specific circumstances and ramifications of mixing music as a hip-hop DJ in the GDR become apparent.

In hip-hop culture, sampling is of vital importance. Malte Pelléter and Steffen Lepa suggest three categories for analyzing this mode of producing new songs by taking from old ones. First, they define sampling as a musical tool that DJs use to appropriate and control any kind of sound, which enables them to create new musical works. The turntable, which the first hip-hop DJs utilized as an acoustic editing table, and later the digital sampler, became the instruments for making music. In this creative process, new sound patterns keep repeating as loops, and composing as well as improvising have increasingly become a matter of programming the instrument. Musical production has thus come to be primarily engineered. Together with the widespread availability of technical equipment and sounds, at least in the West, sampling has effected a radical change in the production of music, empowering teenagers and adolescents who cannot afford or do not want an education in music schools to appropriate and recreate their highly heteronomous everyday soundscapes.

Second, since the aesthetics of sampling are based on material culture, the technique always refers to the meanings of the prefabricated pieces of music it utilizes. Hip-hop artists thus allude to contexts and connotations in specific musical genres. With their contribution, they demonstrate their knowledge of and their location in the history of popular culture. What is more, these intertextual relations emphasize the history of reception of the sampled musical items or “citations.” The different individual meanings of the new piece of music arise in the process of communication between the composer/producer of hip-hop and the listeners. In Russell A. Potter’s words, “Hip-hop sites itself as a product of African-American urban cultures at the same time it cites the sonic past in order to construct a radical present.”

By playing with past and present, sampling contributes to hip-hop’s communicative memory. The knowledge about the birth of hip-hop in the South Bronx and the pioneering work of DJs like Afrika Bambaata, Kool DJ Herc, and Grandmaster Flash or rappers like MC Melle Mel, b-boys like Crazy Legs, and graffiti artists like Taki 183 functions as a part of the genre’s foundational remembrance.


6 Ibid.

The mode of biographical remembrance, i.e., individuals referring to “the early days” and emphasizing how important this period was in their own lives, whether they were producers or fans of hip-hop culture, complements this. In the dynamics of its global cultural transfers over the last thirty years, hip-hop has been enriched by countless narratives of emulation, appropriation, and recreation in its host countries. With its worldwide spread, it has created a global communicative memory with reference to the founding myth in NYC, its local pendants, and personal stories of coming-of-age through hip-hop.

Third, sampling explicitly underlines the historicity and materiality of a particular musical piece. Hip-hop artists thus undermine the idea of autonomous art. They technically reproduce art in the Benjaminian sense—that is, so that the reproduction is permitted “to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, [thus] reactivat[ing] the object reproduced”; they deconstruct the artistic aura in its “here and now,” its “authenticity,” and its “historical testimony.” DJs playfully interact with their audience in order to achieve originality, which always oscillates between past and present, and which ideally creates local and/or historical continuities.

The unique technique of sampling presented GDR hip-hop DJs with special problems, just as the music had an impact there particular to the situation of the socialist nation. To begin with, they did not know how DJing functioned but only what hip-hop sounded like and that its aesthetics differed radically from the rock and pop music they knew. In order to develop DJing skills, then, they needed someone to show them. The institutions that offered seminars on becoming Schallplattenunterhalter (SPUs, vinyl record entertainers) were unsuitable, because they aimed to train good socialist entertainers rather than to keep up with the newest American musical trends. In this situation, Beat Street turned out to be the perfect tutor, as the movie depicts several DJs practicing their craft with the turntables, mixers, and tapes. Inspired by this insight into the necessary techniques, aspiring DJs in the East watched the movie repeatedly in order to master them.

Once they knew how to make the music, would-be hip-hop DJs were confronted with a lack of the needed material goods. Mixers, turntables, and especially records were hard to obtain despite the high demand, so live mixing was impossible. Consequently, DJs resorted


10 See Lepa & Pelleter, 208-209.
to creative solutions: If they could procure records, they copied them on tape and then used the recordings for their mixes. They also followed the music charts of Western radio programs, eager to record the newest rap release or even funk and soul tunes straight from the radio to use as the raw material for their DJ sessions.\textsuperscript{11} They also got their music through contacts. For example, the GDR hip-hop artist TJ Big Blaster Electric Boogie from Dresden received a large variety of vinyl recordings from a friend who was a music journalist; officially he was supposed to write reviews of these albums, but unofficially he used them to make music. Thus, he was able to sample from Bootsie Collins, George Clinton, Frank Zappa, Pink Floyd, Just Ice, and Erik B & Rakim. For his parties in the Dresden youth club Scheune (Barn), he put together taped sets of music that he would sometimes even rap to.\textsuperscript{12} Another DJ from Dresden, DJ Gambler, mixed his songs with a stereo Tesla tape recorder and a mono cassette recorder, recording the different tracks back-and-forth until he was satisfied with the result.\textsuperscript{13} Everywhere in the GDR, DJs, rappers, and b-boys played tapes on their boom boxes, exchanging their newest acquisitions when they gathered for dancing and rapping. Most of these boom boxes were made in the GDR (e.g., the skr 700), but some were imported from the West (e.g., the Sharp GF-777).

If, as noted above, the turntable serves as a time machine in hip-hop music, then GDR DJs also played with time, which likewise meant playing with history. However, this was a subversive act in the eyes of the communist party that controlled the country, the Socialist Unity Party (Sozialistische Einheitspartei, SED). As the SED needed to have history at its command to legitimize its power, no one outside the party was to possess, direct, or define it. The party enacted all public discourse about the past, superimposing narratives like the antifascist founding myth of socialist Germany on individual memories and the traditions of families, milieus, and other social groups. By the 1980s, the prescribed historical narrative, which was intended to include most of the population and convince them of socialism’s superiority, had been transformed into a farce that left large groups feeling ignored and no longer able to identify with it. As a result, the SED kept losing its legitimacy.\textsuperscript{14} GDR teenagers’ identification with the history of hip-hop, which also helped to remove them from the official cultural memory, seems to be symptomatic of the SED’s deterioration of power.

Sampling also helped hip-hop audiences transcend space, and thus, temporarily escape the confines of the GDR: By mixing and

\textsuperscript{11} Starting in January 1988, the East German youth radio station DT 64 broadcast the black music program “Vibrationen” hosted by Lutz Schramm, who played American rap productions and thus sanctioned the recording of rap music from the radio.

\textsuperscript{12} Interview with TJ Big Blaster Electric Boogie, February 29, 2008.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with DJ Gambler, April 5, 2008.

sampling the records and radio songs they received from the West, DJs and their audiences created moments of leaving the GDR for the US. They tuned in to the world of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Run DMC, and Public Enemy, feeling more “at home” with American hip-hop than in the FDJ youth clubs where hip-hop parties usually took place. As the declining SED ultimately lost its power and the GDR was reunified with the West, hip-hop heads’ warping through time and space turned out not to have been so short-lived after all.

In addition, sampling undermined GDR policies of socialist cultural production, which specified the percentage of songs that so-called record entertainers or SPUs were allowed to play from outside the GDR. With the sampling technique of a hip-hop DJ, who plays his turntables and tape recorders like an instrument, such quotas were impossible to regulate. In other words, the SPU was an entertainer and the hip-hop DJ a musician. The authorities could no more tell these DJs what to sample than they could tell a pianist which keys to press, a guitarist which strings to pick, or a trumpeter which valves to open. Young hip-hop DJs were thus able to sample prefabricated music from the United States. Ironically, the officially registered, licensed, and rated DJs among them performed as artists in the “Folklore/Folk Art” category, garnering respect for their contribution to the socialist cultural landscape.

**Beat Street**

*Beat Street* boosted the evolution and spread of hip-hop culture in the GDR not only by amplifying teenage interest and involvement in breakdancing, DJing, rapping, and graffiti, but also by depicting “America” in a way the cultural authorities found acceptable. In this respect, the film served as a point of reference for official appropriations of hip-hop culture. *Beat Street* made it onto the GDR screens, as the following analysis will show, because of the meanings officials assigned to it and the way they connected hip-hop discourse to official socialist discourse on black culture. However, teenage hip-hop heads did not interpret the film as the officials had intended.

The Ministry of Culture’s head office for film approved *Beat Street* for public screening on March 14, 1985.15 As *Body Rock* and *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo* were also considered but only *Beat Street* received approval,16 it must have had a special appeal to the functionaries

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who selected it. Regardless of their reasons—whether they hoped to influence the way teenagers practiced hip-hop in the GDR or they sensed that *Beat Street* could draw an audience large enough to make a profit—these functionaries acted swiftly to approve it. Not only did they seize the very first opportunity to watch the movie—a delegation traveled to West Berlin to attend its West German premiere on July 27, 1984—but they also approved it in a mere eleven months, a very short period compared to the approval process for other Hollywood productions and even other socialist ones.\(^\text{17}\)

Their interpretation of *Beat Street* explained why this American movie should be screened in the GDR. Siegrid Geerdts of the Progress film distribution company that handled the approval process stressed the aspects of community, of living in the ghetto, and the role hip-hop plays for the protagonists in coping with their everyday lives in summarizing the film. This emphasis, which naturally resulted from a particular interpretation of the movie, paved the way for a favorable review. The company recommended the film be approved for its social criticism, its staging of music and dance, and its attractiveness to a young audience:

> The film impressively shows where the roots of this new wave called “hip-hop”—of breakdance, graffiti paintings, and rap music—are to be found. The film achieves its authentic character especially through its many original locations, which put on display the forbidding and disintegrating street blocks where the black populations live, and by casting the main characters with youngsters who live in this milieu, who really do breakdance in the subway, on the streets, etc. Music and dance connect and determine the plot of the film, they are not presented as mere show, because as in the movie, they are in the center of the youngsters’ lives. The boys are usually out of work after leaving school, so that dance, music, and painting help them to pass the time.\(^\text{18}\)

Geerdts furthermore tied *Beat Street*’s achievements to its producer Harry Belafonte, whom she lauded for his involvement in the peace movement and black emancipation. She regarded Belafonte as a warranty that the movie constituted “not only an effectively staged musical, but also an unmasking narrative about the life of youngsters in the black ghetto of New York.”\(^\text{19}\) Years later, she recounted


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 3.
that “with its story and way of depicting it, [Beat Street] matched well with the image we wanted to convey of America.”\(^{20}\) The cultural authorities’ interpretive goal, then, the way they wanted youth in the GDR to watch and understand the film, was geared towards raising consciousness for America as a bad place because of its capitalist exploitation, which created ghettos and discriminated against African Americans.

A brief glance at the way GDR teenagers perceived Beat Street already reveals the wide gap between their youth-cultural understanding of the film as expressed in their appropriations of hip-hop as represented in the movie and the official goal. For them, Beat Street performed authentic hip-hop culture. For one thing, it enabled them to meet real hip-hop stars, their role models, albeit on screen: Kool DJ Herc, DJ Jazzy Jeff, Afrika Bambaataa, the New York City Breakers, and the Rock Steady Crew. For another, they were able to identify with the everyday teenagers in the movie and observe them “doing their thing” in hip-hop: Kenny the DJ and MC, Lee the b-boy, and Ramon the graffiti-artist. What GDR youth had previously pieced together on the basis of media snippets from the West, they could now view “live,” in color, and basically anytime they wanted for only fifty East German Pfennig. Beat Street appealed to them because of its style rather than any political message in its story. Or, as the b-boys themselves recalled about their viewing experience: “What these teenagers had in the Bronx and did with it was a lot more stylish, worlds cooler than anything we Osthäckchen had.”\(^{21}\)

In their self-fashioning, GDR b-boys, rappers, MCs, and graffiti artists emulated Beat Street in far more ways than just their clothing styles. They also performed their visions of New York in their graffiti and the additional accessories of hip-hop attire in the movie, like boom boxes and briefcases. Posing in front of run-down houses in central Dessau, for instance, they invoked “a whiff of New York,” meaning a ghetto in the Bronx (Fig. 1). Equating the Bronx with inner cities in the GDR, though, challenged the sanctioned marketing of socialist cities, which held them up as paragons of modern housing for everyone and relied on spreading immaculate images of progressive urban socialist achievements.

Beat Street embodied a projection screen for both groups of actors involved in hip-hop: the practicing youth and the controlling representatives of state and party. For those in the hip-hop scene, the movie boasted a repertoire of styles, techniques, and messages


\(^{21}\) Bonus Material, in ibid., Heading “Beat Street,” 05:48-06:14. “Osthäckchen” is a self-denigrating term for people from the East; here, the b-boy uses it ironically.
that made sense in their lives east of the Iron Curtain. The b-boys and graffiti artists took hip-hop to the streets, eagerly learned the moves, beats, rhymes, and graffiti, and generally made sure they had a good time. By living *Beat Street*, they located themselves in the Bronx, albeit only in their imagination. For the authorities, however, these appropriations generated uncertainty since they were ambivalent: On the one hand, they regarded “doing” hip-hop as an act of international solidarity with the oppressed black population in the US, whom civil rights activist Belafonte portrayed in the movie. On the other hand, partying on the streets, sporting brand names, and writing graffiti on the walls belonged to forms of adolescent behavior they despised and found unacceptable.

**“It’s spray-time now”–A graffiti incident in Rostock**

In April 1987, an unofficial informant told his officer at the State Security office in Rostock about graffiti on the wall of a school gym. He relayed that a former classmate, Jörg Pribbenow, and his breakdance crew had spray-painted “It’s spray-time now” (in English) and had taken photographs of their graffiti, which had been painted over the next day. A study group at the informant’s school, the seven-member crew called the “Crazy street-breaker[s]” (also in English) had previously taken part in spray-painting other graffiti including the English words “Tako,” “Show,” and “Crazy.” While this information in itself did not seem to bother the MfS, the added revelation that one member had boasted of spraying the slogan “Russians out of Afghanistan” on the same spot aroused suspicion and triggered a secret police operation to observe Pribbenow. The report continued:

> Whether the two slogans had been created at the same time the source could not determine. The youth continued
that “the Stasi” had visited him at home because of this slogan. Very confidently, he said: “They can’t prove anything.”

The file documenting this operation provides useful insight into how the Stasi in Rostock dealt with hip-hop culture, and especially with graffiti. I argue that the secret police overzealously focused on finding evidence for matching their criteria of “politically negative,” leading them to look for the obvious rather than the implied. In this context, the operation reveals the State Security’s paranoia and the suspicions it entertained towards the cultural practice of hip-hop. Instead of coming closer to finding out how hip-hop functioned as a youth culture, that is, outside the grip of mass organizations, the agency solely concerned itself with assessing the extent to which hip-hoppers inside the regime expressed acceptable socialist morals and values. From this limited policing perspective, the MfS failed to detect any real life relevance in hip-hop graffiti and therefore presented it as non-political. The incident involved two graffiti: two “daubs” consisting of “slogans,” in police language, one of which was clearly politically charged, with the Soviet-Afghan war raging at the time. Thus, it is not clear whether MfS officials aimed to prosecute graffiti artists in general or whether they were only interested in pursuing perpetrators of threats against state authority or defamations of the Soviet Union. In other words, did the Stasi, at least in Rostock, consider hip-hop-graffiti “politically-negative,” the phrase they applied to people and practices that they went after?

In the beginning, the two Stasi captains responsible for the operation treated the incident as a whole and did not distinguish between the two graffiti. They categorized them as “agitation against the state” and “public vilification of the state order,” following §106 and §220 of the GDR penal code, using this to propose monitoring the whole breakdance crew, and specifically Jörg Pribbenow, its founder and leader. Based on background information they gathered from existing sources, they deemed him harmless: As someone interested in politics, he had been an “agitator in his class” (i.e., he was entrusted by his teachers with organizing and overseeing political activities for his class) and a “member of the FDJ group administration,” which was why they could not see any “negative moral conduct.” His seeming impeccability notwithstanding, the two captains devised a tight-knit plan of investigative operations.

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22 MfS, BVfS Rostock KD Hafen, “OPK ‘Spray,’” April 9, 1987, 8, BStU, BVfS Rostock, AOPK 3256/87, Band I, BStU. Translation mine.

23 They worked in the harbor office of the MfS-Rostock. As the file of the unofficial agent “Rainer Müller” shows, this office kept a particularly close eye on sailors as it expected them to attempt to flee the GDR. See MfS, BVfS Rostock KD Hafen, “GMS ‘Rainer Müller,’” January 9, 1986, 41-87, BStU.

The “operative plan” was geared towards substantiating the suspicion following the penal code and consisted of three parts: using unofficial informants, checking official sources and networks, and applying standard procedures of secret police reconnaissance. The first measure, titled “offensive assignment of unofficial forces,” called for espionage by two unofficial informants, “Rainer Müller” and “Herbert Kleinfeld.” Müller, roughly the same age as Pribbenow, was to reinforce his contact with him by arranging to have the breakdance crew officially paint two more graffiti in Rostock youth clubs and by attending (break)dance events; he was also to find out where and when the crew practiced. Primarily, though, the MfS officials wanted him to search for evidence such as spray cans, paint, and brushes. Kleinfeld, a close relative of Pribbenow’s belonging to his parents’ generation, was to investigate Pribbenow’s social network to identify the breakdancer who spray-painted the graffiti with the “politically negative” content. Kleinfeld was also to perform a secret search of his room to gather evidence. While finding and securing evidence belonged to the more traditional operations, Rainer Müller’s strategy was new: It was specifically designed to embed youth cultural practices in officially sanctioned activities, e.g., spray-painting graffiti in youth clubs, and thus winning the trust of Pribbenow’s breakdance crew (as well as controlling what they actually painted). The second and third parts were to be carried out by MfS officials and involved intercepting Pribbenow’s mail, wiretapping his phone, and collecting data from the police networks in Rostock, including the municipal criminal investigation department of the People’s Police and the higher-ranking regional office of the MfS. Accessing these additional resources, then, meant that the MfS had to coordinate several sections in different levels of the chain of command with the People’s Police.

Neither the unofficial informants nor the official operations yielded any evidence the MfS could use to proceed with the case. The only new information was provided by the regional MfS bureau concerned with youth culture (section XX), which added that Rainer Müller was wrong about the place of the graffiti: “It is not the gymnasium at the Alte-Warnemünde-Chaussee but the complex of stores and public houses at the Kusnezow-Ring in Rostock-Schmarl.” Since interrogating the alleged sprayer named JV had not clarified the case, the two MfS captains of the harbor section responsible for the investigation chose to have an “operative conversation” with Pribbenow in the hope that he, as the head of the breakdance crew, could best aid them.

25 See ibid., 11-12.
26 See ibid., 12-13.
27 Ibid., 51.
The “operative conversation” turned out to be an eight-hour interrogation of Pribbenow. The two MfS officials pursued three goals: First, they wanted to find out whether or not JV had spray-painted the “politically negative” slogan. Second, they intended to infer from the outcome whether b-boys in general, at least in Rostock, were involved in spray-painting these slogans. Third, in case the b-boys and especially Pribbenow turned out to be harmless, they aimed to recruit him as an unofficial informant for “the operative control of breakdance groups and their members in Rostock.” They based their approach on their previously formulated hypothesis that either JV was alone guilty of “public vilification of the state order” (note that the “agitation against the state” charge had been dropped), or in collaboration with other b-boys, or that he just wanted attention and therefore used his knowledge of the locations of such “politically negative” graffiti to falsely imply that he had been the perpetrator.

Pribbenow confirmed that he and his breakdance crew “Crazy Seven” (as they were called then) had spray-painted “It’s spray-time now” in October 1986, and that JV had been involved in that, but he denied any knowledge of the “Russians out of Afghanistan” graffiti. In the eyes of the MfS officials, the b-boys of “Crazy Seven” did not spray-paint any “politically negative” slogans, nor did they have any “negative-decadent” attitudes. Hence, the interrogators concluded that JV “had used knowledge gained from interrogations by MfS officials to make his claims about daubs in Rostock.” In other words, one MfS investigation about graffiti in Rostock had led to another one, which allowed the captains of the MfS harbor bureau to conclude that the first had triggered the second without any new “public vilification of the state order” or “agitation against the state” actually taking place.

This outcome means that the MfS, by its very own paranoid and overzealous activities, created more work for itself. More importantly, however, it shows that the MfS in Rostock did not perceive hip-hop graffiti as anything to condemn. It neither regarded “It’s spray-time now” nor the previous graffiti “Tako,” “Show,” and “Crazy,” which officials found out about in the investigation, as dangerous. Nevertheless, they maintained their distrust and expressed their wish to have breakdancing and graffiti controlled in the future. They scheduled more meetings with Pribbenow in order to recruit him as an unofficial informant for this purpose. As the file does not...
include any further information on this, however, it seems safe to assume that the two captains did not follow through with this plan. In closing the “Spray” case on December 17, 1987, they probably also abandoned the idea of recruiting Pribbenow.32

While the Stasi tactics in this investigation were typical in many ways, they also conveyed a lack of organization and interconnectedness between the agencies responsible for controlling hip-hop. It was common to ask teenagers as youth culture insiders to spy on their peers. These unofficial agents were indispensable not so much for their inside knowledge, monitoring, and controlling of their friends and acquaintances but as decoders of the information they conveyed. They interpreted signification processes of youth culture that the Stasi could not understand, embodying the Stasi’s only direct way to bridge the generational gap between officials and those they spied upon. However, there were a number of other indirect published sources of information on youth cultures, including the magazine Melodie & Rhythmus, the supplement Informationen to the journal Unterhaltungskunst, and the FDJ magazine Junges Leben, all of which the Rostock MfS surprisingly did not bother to consult. Even more astonishingly, it neglected to contact the FDJ, the Stadtkulturkabinett (municipal bureau for culture), or the Bezirkskommission für Unterhaltungskunst (regional commission for entertainment culture), any and all of which would have had useful information on Jörg Pribbenow and “Crazy Seven.”33 Most unusual, however, seems to be the regional bureau’s failure to connect with other regional bureaus of the MfS, such as the municipal bureau in Riesa. In November 1984, this bureau had already sought guidance from the regional bureau in Dresden concerning breakdancing on the streets, but it did not receive any at the time.34 Since bureaus did not communicate their experiences in dealing with hip-hop culture with one another, the MfS had to rely excessively on its unofficial informants.

The MfS, however, did not succeed in recruiting hip-hop heads as unofficial informants.35 The MfS officials in Rostock, therefore, had to rely on the interrogation with Pribbenow to progress in the case. As they had not read publications on breakdancing, rap, and graffiti, they had to make sense of Pribbenow’s statements without any further context. Maybe that is why they explained graffiti as the “installation of fantasy pictures on public space such as walls of houses, subway trains, etc. with spray-paint.”36 Since fantasy, in
their eyes, did not refer to real life in the GDR, they judged it to be politically harmless, if not even a political. But the graffiti shown in Figure 2—in a photograph taken by the young artists—is, in my reading, more than just fantasy.

The photo shows three members of Crazy Seven in front of their graffiti. It belongs to a series of pictures, which were all taken immediately after the graffiti was created, and in which the b-boys/artists strike various hip-hop poses. Merely taking the photographs is part of a hip-hop practice to affirm artistic presence: Regardless of whether the graffiti on the wall—as an ephemeral work of art—would be witnessed by an audience, the photo testified to Crazy Seven’s iconographic inscription into public space.

The graffiti reads “Spray Time” (rather than “It’s spray-time now,” as the MfS described it) in two shades of red, with the word “crazy” painted underneath it in green and both phrases outlined in black.37 On the right side, the boys painted “rap” in a three-dimensional style. There are two so-called characters in the picture—a spray can and a person, both in green, black, and white. While the spray can emits “Spray Time” in a cloud of aerosol, the person thinks “crazy” in a cartoon-like thought balloon. The graffiti not only features common hip-hop motifs—the spray can, “rap”—thus taking part in a transatlantic imaginary world of hip-hop culture; it also comments on itself with its spatial organization of styles, colors, and characters. In reacting to “Spray Time” (emblazoned twice as large as the little thought balloon) with “crazy,” the artists formulated a frequent verdict of graffiti. At the same time, though, the word refers to the name of the group, ironically deconstructing the comment and pointing to the artistic creators. Crazy Seven thus played with graffiti and its notions in public space—a game that only worked because graffiti is rooted in society and not in fantasy.

37 “Spray time” was painted in bubble-style, i.e., with round and soft lines, whereas “crazy” can be categorized as a blockbuster style, with linear and hard lines. See http://www.graffitierein.de/Forschung/FS_Forschung.html.
The MfS’s misinterpretation of the graffiti, to be sure, was rooted in the fact that the officers never saw the graffiti or photographs of it. This explains not only their incorrect rendering of the slogan “spray time” as “It’s spray-time now,” but also their ignorance of the different styles and characters typical of hip-hop graffiti. While I still do not know what the “Russians out of Afghanistan” graffiti looked like, I feel it is safe to assume that it was not hip-hop graffiti, but merely a monochrome slogan written on the wall. With its easily perceptible political message, this scribble posed a clear state threat to the MfS. “Spray time,” in contrast, although it depicted the very act of spray-painting, turned out to be undecipherable to the organization and was therefore dismissed as mere fantasy. In hip-hop culture, then, it seems that teenagers could communicate subtle political messages in playful, encrypted content—a practice also to be found in hip-hop self-fashioning.

**Backward caps—Hip-hop self-fashioning GDR style**

People consume fashion to create identity, express themselves, and put their bodies on display. Young people are particularly prone to use fashion signifiers in striving for difference, otherness, and authenticity. They freely recombine these signifiers according to their personal tastes and desires to create new meanings with and for the clothes they wear. In this respect, the adolescent consumption of fashion opposes any kind of uniformity, whether it takes the form of politically motivated dress codes or arises from a lack of supply.\(^{38}\) Mass-produced fashion challenges teenagers’ efforts to fashion themselves because it is paradoxically based on the principle of uniformity. When ready-to-wear clothing arrived in the eighteenth century, following directly on the manufacture of military uniforms, uniformity came to be built automatically into every serially produced—and thus generally affordable—garment. Teenagers therefore strive to achieve a balance in their self-fashioning: On the one hand, they struggle to individualize their fashion, and, on the other, they seek to secure their peer group’s respect by making only minor modifications. Ironically, their outfits often resemble uniforms after all.\(^{39}\)

Pop cultural stars, in general, and the way they dress, in specific, serve as role models for adolescents, who emulate these styles to gain acceptance in their peer group. Instead of designer clothing at exorbitant prices, teenagers utilize so-called samples (cheap fakes of expensive designs), which the fashion industry readily supplies,
to copy their favorite celebrity’s outward appearance. They also make use of retro productions, which simulate the vintage garments of past fashion periods. The historical fashion iconography they thus access, and which they have never experienced in the original, is new and alien to them. By familiarizing themselves with these visual fashion codes, they learn to deconstruct them and tease their parents’ generation with their provocative potential.40 Both these methods of individualizing fashion could be found in modified form among East German teenagers.

Hip-hop fashion in the GDR differed in its consumption and, more importantly, in its production from that of the West. On the one hand, ideological limitations determined its conditions: Although the SED did not explicitly dictate any dress codes, one clearly could not run around sporting Western brands without fear of consequences. In schools, workplaces, and mass organizations like the FDJ, fashion consumption was controlled and, if necessary, penalized. However, youths could sometimes get away with wearing a Puma t-shirt, a Mickey Mouse sweater, or Levi’s jeans because enforcement of the unwritten code was often lax. On the other hand, the GDR economy...
could not meet hip-hoppers demand for items they required for their self-fashioning as b-boys, rappers, DJs, and graffiti artists. While capitalist fashion production already had built-in uniformity, the available variety of garments for recombining, altering, and individualizing under socialism was even smaller, presenting a particular challenge to these teenagers. Some had contacts to the West who helped them to acquire the fashion commodities they desired, but those who did not turned to producing their clothing themselves.

Take, for example, the Berlin b-boy crew Boogie Wave (Fig. 4). Most dancers’ attire had to fulfill several purposes: “Well, the gear had to be comfortable, flexible, and suitable for b-boying. Most of all, though, it had to look cool,” they recalled. It had to be uniform enough to identify them as a crew, but individual enough to mark them as special among the other b-boys. Disappointed by the limited supply of such attire in the GDR—“There was not much, when you looked for sports gear, only a few elastic track suits, that was it”—they resorted to sewing their clothing themselves.41 B-boy Tom Nixx, who was completing an apprenticeship to become a tailor at the time, designed their b-boy outfits, usually making one uniform out of the raw material of two regular track suits. A suit like the one shown in Figure 3 could thus have served as the material basis for making Boogie Wave’s fashionable appearance in the hip-hop scene.

In their peer group and as individuals, GDR hip-hop heads utilized visual codes for constructing and displaying their identity and belonging. As with the music, they modeled themselves on Beat Street: as Puma had supplied the fashion for the movie in a product-placement effort, it was Puma that they wanted to wear. And so they did—adding the Puma logo onto their shirts and pants by painting (with a toothbrush)42 and airbrushing (with a hair-spraying device),43 or ironing on Puma patches bought in Hungary or Czechoslovakia (see Fig. 5).

In addition to Puma and other brands like Nike and adidas, Dresden graffiti artist Simo explains, “the hoodie, baseball cap, and
leather sneakers were the three most important things” in hip-hop fashion. Various pictures illustrate how widespread these “DIY” clothing aesthetics had become. Emulating Beat Street also involved showing off self-made outfits “ghetto-style,” i.e., in the ruins of houses, which created an atmosphere with a “whiff of New York.” This practice, together with the backpiece graffiti on the hoodies and jackets (see Fig. 6), which often pictured the Statue of Liberty, the Brooklyn Bridge, or other NYC landmarks, suggests that the identity and sense of belonging these young hip-hoppers expressed was located in their vision of America.

They equated the Bronx with the GDR—a confining ghetto that they could only escape through hip-hop culture. Like consuming and producing hip-hop music, then, hip-hop self-fashioning (also with graffiti-clothes) functioned as a means of breaking out of the GDR on an imaginary level.

**Conclusion**

The things young hip-hop heads in the GDR produced and consumed in their practices of rapping, DJing, b-boying, and graffiti bear witness to their creativity and desire to build their own environment. All three—graffiti, music, and fashion—served as vehicles for overcoming the confining GDR on an imaginary level. The meanings they assigned to the objects they designed and used testify that they lived, despite all material and ideological constraints, in their vision of America.

Furthermore, the things they used defy categorization as distinctly socialist, German, or American. As they transcended national
borders and even managed to penetrate the Iron Curtain, they can only be analyzed in a transnational framework. The culture of hip-hop, which feeds on material culture and plays with images, soundscapes, and words, set these things in motion when it left the Bronx and became globally known. Puma t-shirts, adidas sneakers, vinyl records, boom boxes and backward caps—all these commodities and fashion items became cultural mobilizers as they traveled around the world. With the ideas, ideals, and ideologies people attributed to them, they allowed for highly ambivalent resonances, including condemning capitalism, provoking socialist authorities, expressing international solidarity, or celebrating a good party and having a good time.

Without these things and the stories they attest to, the transnational cultural history of the Cold War era would be missing an integral repository. After all, this era saw the rise of postindustrial societies East and West of the Iron Curtain, and with that the rise of modern consumer cultures, either capitalist or socialist. As a cultural historian of the everyday, I include these commodities in my research. I am thankful to museums, and especially to the museums and professional collectors who also preserve the pieces from the margins. They allow me to give voice to their experiences—to let the deaccessioned speak.

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