'These stories have to be told' –

Chicano Rap as historical source

'The talent that I drop is a mystery

I don't drop science – I drop history!'

— Kid Frost, 'Hispanic Causing Panic' (1990)

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, the Mexican-American rapper (Kid) Frost[1] released his hit-single 'La Raza', one of the first songs of a newly evolving genre 'Chicano rap'. Chicano rap was created by Mexican-American and Latino DJs and rappers in the sphere of West Coast Latino and gangster rap. It distinguishes itself due to transcultural signifiers of music, language and culture: key aspects involve oldie, Latin jazz and Chicano rock samples, multilingual lyrics, and the proclamation of Brown pride. Narratives about gang violence, Mexican heroes, and daily life in the *varrio* ['hood] articulate the artists' alienation from white America. The lyrics in 'Spanglish' mirror the transcultural reality of Latino and Mexican-American youth, encouraging them to be proud of their roots and find their own voice (Hochman 1990).

Frost has been named 'the Godfather of Chicano Rap' (McFarland 2008: 35), for he and his contemporaries created a music style that inspired a whole generation of bilingual rappers.

[1] While this artist started out as Kid Frost, he dropped the 'Kid' in 1995 and is since referred to as 'Frost'. Therefore, I will refer to him as Frost throughout this text.

During the early 1990s, a growing number of Chicano and Latino artists started to emerge in L.A., and groups such as Cypress Hill and Delinquent Habits gained worldwide popularity. On a socio-political level, however, Mexican Americans were subjected to racism and language discrimination in the state of California due to federal and international policies such as Proposition 187, Operation Gatekeeper and NAFTA. Proposition 187 intended to deny health services and education to undocumented immigrants in California. The bill sparked state-wide student walk outs and split the Latino electorate but was eventually passed in late 1994 (Acuña 2015; Davis 2001). This anti-immigration sentiment also led to Operation Gatekeeper in the same year: a single-handed measure by the Clinton Administration to control migration streams from Mexico through the militarization of the border. Ironically, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had just opened up the markets between Canada, the United States, and Mexico. As Foley (2014: 210) pointedly concludes, 'NAFTA, in short, resulted in the free flow of capital and goods across the border at the same time that the United States was building border fences to keep Mexicans out'.

These political issues were reflected in the expressive lyrical content and strengthening of cultural consciousness in Chicano rap in general and in Frost's *oeuvre* in particular. Arguing that 'La Raza' (1990) marks the birth of Chicano rap the song will serve as the point of departure for this critical source analysis from a historical perspective. 30 years after its release, Chicano rap is more widespread than ever; Chicano rap artists now tour from Detroit to Atlanta. Due to streaming platforms and increased Latino immigration, artists and fanbases extend beyond the US Southwest which had been the primary sphere of influence in the early 1990s. Yet, 'La Raza' was mentioned as a cornerstone of the genre in nearly every conversation with practitioners and contemporaries during my fieldwork.[2]

[2] The research for this article was conducted as part of a PhD project at the University of Bern under the advisement of Prof. Britta Sweers and Prof. Christian Büschges. The PhD thesis is part of the umbrella project "Hip-Hop as a Transcultural Phenomenon" funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

The story of the emergence of hip-hop as the 'voice of the marginal and dispossessed' has been told countless times and it usually revolves around identity and authentic expression. While these issues are vital for the genre and present in the work of Latino performers on the West Coast as well, their stories and careers are much more complex and challenge the Afro-centric narrative of hip-hop. Echoing Frost's lyrics that inspired this article, 'this story is getting kinda old, but it has to be told', I aim to show that the repetition of this 'old' story under new circumstances raises important historiographical questions. How does Chicano rap contribute to the social historiography of the Chicanos? In-depth analyses of Frost's discography indicate a reflectivity within his work that makes this historical approach a multi-layered one.

On the basis of a case study of Frost's releases during the 1990s, we will trace topics, cultural signifiers and musical features that mirror a resurfacing of Chicano consciousness and identity during this time. Placing his work into (historical) context requires a look behind the surface as music samples and lyrical keywords have a history of their own that is worth exploring to fully grasp the meaning of the music. Methodologically, this paper adopts a framework of triangulation: qualitative field research, ethnography (in-depth interviews[3]), and critical and qualitative source evaluation. The last will be complemented by secondary literature, and interviews by online and print media. Primary sources are selected songs, as well as music videos and the album artwork that accompanied them.

Divided into three sections, I will analyse several different aspects of Frost's music. The first section looks at '*La Raza*' as a trailblazer for this new genre in the making. Building upon longstanding scholarship (et. al. Pérez-Torres 2000; Saldívar 1997; Kelly 1996), I aim to give a fresh historical perspective to the song, and to foreground its pivotal influence on contemporary Chicano rap to the foreground. The second and third sections focus on two respective signature styles within Frost's music. On the one hand, the sampling of Chicano rock

[3] If not annotated differently, quotes by Frost are taken from a personal interview with him (May 13, 2019).

and ‘oldies’ – mostly funk and soul from the 1960s and ‘70s – combined with a street conscious lyrical content. And on the other, the unique combination of Mexican folk music with heavy West Coast beats and lyrics in a *narcocorrido* [’drug ballad’] fashion. The *narcocorrido* is a Mexican musical genre that derives from the *corrido norteño*, that is characterized by narratives about narcotics, violence, and the heroization of drug kingpins (Morrison 2008). The first style has been evident since Frost’s very first studio album, the second current began to grow from 1995 onward and will be the main focus of the analysis; both became popular among practitioners in the Chicano rap community and are now key to the genre. Finally, I will draw a conclusion from a historical perspective, through connecting the dots between Frost’s musical and lyrical development and his socio-political environment.

‘LA RAZA’ AND THE BEGINNINGS OF CHICANO RAP

Los Angeles is a city with large African-American and Mexican-American populations, both cultures mingling in working class neighbourhoods since the 1930s (Kelley 1996; Macías 2008). The interconnectedness of both through music, dance and rebellious youth cultures was apparent in the moment of jive and zoot suiters during the 1940s and throughout the Black and Brown Power and the Black and Chicano Arts Movements of the 1960s and ‘70s (Macías 2008). Thus, when hip-hop culture spread from East to West in the 1980s, it found a fertile ground in L.A. and ‘black and brown syncretisms were quick to follow’ (Morrison 2008: 381). West Coast artists created their very own sound and style, translating the core elements of hip-hop to their own multi-cultural environment. Los Angeles was stricken by gang violence during the 1980s and ‘90s and many artists integrated gang culture and aesthetics into their music. This ultimately inclined music journalists to coin the term ‘gangster rap’ which is still largely associated with West Coast rap (Baker 2018: v). Early representatives were primarily African-Americans such as Ice-T and N.W.A. Notwithstanding, Mexican-American and Latino hip-hop artists were

present on the West Coast from the very beginning and Frost was 'one of the earliest to make it to wax' (Kelly 1996: 99).

So, who was this Mexican American penetrating a form predominantly-associated with African-American artists? Born Arturo Ramón Molina, Jr. in 1964, Frost partly grew up on military bases in Panama and across the US due to his stepfather's employment in the military. Frost recalls that the diversity on the bases brought him in contact with a variety of music. Styles such as soul, r'n'b, and P-Funk, and that it was a kid from Brooklyn, New York, that introduced him to rapping in 1978. A year later, the first hip-hop record 'Rappers Delight' (1979) came out. The B-side of the single featured an instrumental, encouraging the listeners to rap their own version to the beat – '[and] that was really the birth of Kid Frost', he remembers. At 16 years old, Frost was sent to live with his grandparents and 'unleashed into the streets of East L.A.' Although he was never an official gang member, Frost came of age around street gangs and was in conflict with the law constantly.

Frost started rapping alongside Ice-T who took a liking to him: 'He [Ice-T] could have picked anybody. He could have picked any Black rapper … But he's seen something. He's like: That boy, him. The one that's the flamboyant, and yelling, and screaming, and talking the most shit – he's the one.' Frost's first recordings, 'Rough Cut' (1984) and 'Terminator' (1985) featured English lyrics and 'a decidedly early West Coast flavor' (Kelly 1996: 99). Over the next few years, a significant change occurred in his sound, 'a change in consciousness' according to Kelly (1996: 101). Ice-T (Tracy Marrow) who also inspired Frost's artist name, played a key role in this as he kept telling Frost that he had talent but still needed to find his 'lane'. Two more people were crucial for this development: a Chicano Arts major from Colombia, who taught him about Chicano history. And finally, Cuban-American musician and radio DJ Tony G. (Tony González), who produced 'La Raza'. Tony G. was a DJ on 1580 KDAY, the only L.A. radio station that would play rap music at a time when it was not

commercially successful yet on the West Coast. Tony G. is a vital actor in the creation of Latino and Chicano rap. He integrated Latin jazz and Chicano rock music samples and melodies, encouraging Latino and Mexican-American artists to rap in Spanish (McFarland 2008: 40). For 'La Raza' Tony G. sampled 'Viva Tirado', 'arguably one of the most famous "authentic" Chicano sounds of the Chicano Youth Power social movement' (Saldívar 1997: 128). Instead of 'just' rapping in English, Frost added Spanish and Chicano street slang to the mix. These multi-lingual lyrics articulated street and ethno-conscious content and expressive Chicano keywords, as well as gangster aesthetics.

'La Raza' instantly became a '*cholo* anthem' [*cholo* 'Mexican gangster'] and it was Frost's greatest hit to date, peaking at #14 on the Rap Tracks chart, #33 on the Hot Latin Tracks chart, and #42 on the Billboard Hot 100. His album *Hispanic Causing Panic* entered both the Top Pop Album and Top Black album charts (Abe 2013: 403). Many practitioners and contemporaries that I interviewed consider 'La Raza' the first Chicano rap single although that label did not exist at the time of its release. However, it was not the first rap record featuring multi-lingual lyrics. On the East Coast, the MC crew Mean Machine had recorded their bilingual song 'Disco Dream' as early as 1981 (Del Barco 1996). This song inspired Cuban-born Mellow Man Ace (Ulpiano Sergio Reyes) to rap in Spanish on the West Coast (Mellow Man Ace, personal interview). His debut songs 'Más Pingón' ['badass motherfucker'] (1987)[4] and 'Mentirosa' ['liar'] (1989) were the first published West Coast bilingual rap songs to get radio airplay. 'Mentirosa' was also produced by Tony G.; it sampled the popular Carlos Santana tune 'Evil Ways' (1969) and was the first Latino Rap record to go gold (Moore 2010: 236). The corresponding debut album *Escape from Havana* (1991) is considered one of the first Latino rap albums, next to Frost's *Hispanic Causing Panic* (1990), Lighter Shade of Brown's *Brown & Proud* (1990), Cypress Hill's self-titled album (1991), and Frost's supergroup Latin

[4] The single was released as 'Do This (Spanish Flavor)' in 1987 on Delicious Vinyl and again in 1989 under the name 'Más Pingón' on Capitol Records.

Alliance's sole album *Latin Alliance* (1991). Frost describes the resurfacing pan-Latino identity culminating in bilingual rap as a spiritual thing. He remembers that he listened to 'Mas Pingón' on the radio when he was already working on 'La Raza' and could not believe his ears.

'La Raza' starts out with a theme of its primary sample 'Viva Tirado', which is looped. After a one-bar loop, the bass-drum and snare kick in, constituting a 'boom-boom-bap' beat typically of '90s hip-hop. Looking closer to the music, we find a multi-layered sampling process. 'Viva Tirado' was last interpreted in 1970 by Chicano rock band El Chicano, who were part of the 'Brown Sound' of the civil rights era. El Chicano, in turn, had already borrowed the melody from African-American Jazz trumpeter Gerald Wilson who had recorded this song in 1962. Wilson adapted Latin influences into his style, incorporating Cuban and Brazilian inflections as well as Mexican and Spanish elements. Kun and Pulido (2013: 5) pointedly characterize this as 'completing a remarkable cycle of Black-Brown cultural cross-talk: a song by a Black artist inspired by a Mexican bullfighter is covered by a Chicano band inspired by the Black civil rights movement, whose version is sampled by a Chicano MC working in hip-hop.'

'La Raza' illustrates the transculturality of Chicano rap. Frost combined both African-American and Chicano influences, albeit clearly addressing 'his people'. The term *la raza* goes back to the essay 'La Raza Cósmica' (1925) by the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos was referring to the *mestizaje* ['fusion', 'miscegenation'] of Caucasian and Indigenous peoples in Latin America, that led to the 'creation of a race made of the treasures of all previous races, the final race, the cosmic race' (Vasconcelos 1948: 54, translation by author). Since the 1960s, Chicano activists have used *la raza* to refer to their 'people' – much like *mi gente* ['my people']. The meaning of the term changed over time and is not to be translated literally, as Acosta (2010: 279) clarifies: '[t]he term does not refer to the race in the conventional American sense, with all of its historical and cultural implications, but to an

identification with people, culture and shared experience'. Hence, *la raza* may apply not only to Mexican Americans, but to Latinos in general. McFarland (2013: 48) argues, the frequent use of the term 'illustrates how Chicanos and Mexican Americans, especially emcees [i.e. rappers], view race, and the priority they place on people of their race'.

While the title suggests an all-Spanish song, Frost's lyrics are both in English and Spanish, as well as 'Spanglish' and *caló*. In contrast to 'Spanglish' – a mixture of English and Spanish generally spoken by bilingual people in the US – *caló* is a hybrid language with origins in the Spanish gypsy dialect *zincaló*, spoken throughout the US-Southwest mainly by Chicanos. Macías (2008: 88) points out three primary characteristics of *caló*: 'hispanicized English words or phrases… Spanish translations of English slang… [and] loan words from black vernacular English, particularly jive'. As Pérez-Torres (2000: 226) notes, *caló* 'has spread through the Chicano world as a form of linguistic demarcation. From its inception, the term 'caló' has been associated with marginal constituencies'. Consequently, knowledge of this informal language is necessary in order to follow the conversation.[5] In the second verse, Frost explains:

> The form that I'm speaking is known as *caló*,
>
> *Y sabes qué, loco? Yo soy muy malo,* [You know what, fool? I am real bad]
>
> *Tu no sabes nada*, your brain is hollow, [You know nothing]
>
> Been hit in the head to many times with a *palo*. [stick]

Frost switches back and forth between languages in one and the same sentence, while English remains the dominant language that foremost determines the syntax. This linguistical variety allows Frost to form cunning rhymes that would not work or convey the same humour when rapped in English alone. Pérez-Torres (2000: 207) stresses the combination of

[5] My interlocutors never used the term *caló* and simply referred to it as 'L.A. street slang'. I also noticed that the term 'Spanglish' was often used to refer to Chicano slang in general, including words that technically derive from *caló*.

braggadocio typically for rap and the multilingualism in Frost's lyrics, arguing that '[t]he punning and dissing characteristic of the wordplay of African-American rap in this type of polyglot Chicano rap works only for those auditors capable of making the linguistic leaps between caló, Spanish, and English'. Frost's code-switching thus evokes 'a sense of imagined community between himself and his auditors' (Pérez-Torres 2000: 207-208). Frost elucidates this right before the first chorus: 'Some of you don't know what's happening, *qué pasa?* [what's going on?]/ It's not for you anyway, 'cause this is for the *raza*!'

Lyrically, Frost is taking the listener 'into the mind of a cholo' (Hochman 1990). Besides boasting to an imaginary opponent, Frost makes references to Mexican-American cultural history: 'It's in my blood to be an Aztec warrior.' Re-writing the history of the Conquista, Frost is establishing himself as a descendent of the Aztecs, who is superior to his enemies and not afraid to use gun violence on them. Moreover, Frost's referral to the Black and Brown Civil Rights Movements takes place on both musical and lyrical levels: 'Chicano, and I'm brown and proud' pays tribute to James Brown, while the conscious use of the term 'Chicano' is an homage to the Chicano Movement and the re-affirmation of *chicanismo* [Chicano activism] that emerged in the 1960s and '70s. The use of keywords like '*la raza*', 'Chicano', '*caló*' and 'Aztec warrior' underlines the empowering educational aspect of Frost's music. 'I wanted to let the young Raza know that we can do something. We don't have to be stuck', Frost said in an interview with AllHipHop.com (2012).

The song is a strong manifesto of Chicano pride and consciousness, which is highlighted further in the corresponding music video (Doucette 1990). The video was shot in the Estrada Court Projects in Boyle Heights, a location specifically requested by Frost. Against the rough background of murals from the 1970s, Frost is depicted in the midst of Mexican gangsters, beautiful Latinas and lowrider cars. It was the first West Coast rap video to feature lowrider cars, before they appeared in Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg's videos throughout the 1990s and were

primarily attributed to Black gangster rap culture. As Chappell (2012) shows, 'lowriding' or 'cruising' is a subversive activity of occupying urban space that goes back to the 1940s. The criminalization of lowriding by law highlights the danger associated with lowriders and the assumed relation to Chicano street gangs. The portrayal of lowriding in popular culture was also considered subversive, as the closing of Whittier Boulevard just before the release of the Chicano street movie *Boulevard Nights* (1979) underlines (Chappell 2012: 188). Whittier Boulevard is one of the famous cruising streets in East L.A. that has been featured in various Chicano motion pictures and Chicano rap videos.

Through the interplay of lyrics and visuals, Frost is establishing a Mexican-American identity that is underlined by its allegiance to the Chicano Movement, the *pachuco* and zoot cultures, and lowrider tradition. At the same time, the video clearly positions Frost and his music within hip-hop culture as it features breakdancing, graffiti art and hip-hop clothing. Specifically, the authentic *cholo* attire (i.e. khaki work pants, white t-shirts, Pendleton shirts) of the people appearing in the video is foreshadowing a style that would dominate West Coast rap from the 1990s onward.

CHICANO RAP – 'STREET ETHNOGRAPHY'

We have seen the expressive cultural tapestry Frost established with '*La Raza*' and the corresponding album *Hispanic Causing Panic*. In the subsequent four albums that he published mostly in two-year intervals during the 1990s, the key components of Chicano rap continue to be evident: street conscious lyrics and beats that fuse typical hip-hop bass lines with Chicano rock, Latin jazz or 'oldie' samples (mostly from the funk and soul repertoire). To reinforce the content of his lyrics, Frost works with the 'imaging'[6] of motion pictures, skits and dialogues,

[6] The use of motion picture extracts in rap music is called 'imaging' (Alridge 2005), a style element that Frost uses continuously in his work.

as well as news footage, gun shots and street soundscapes (horns, cars). Robin D.G. Kelley's definition of West Coast gangster rap as 'a sort of street ethnography of racist institutions and racial practices' (Kelley 1996: 190, quoted in Saldívar 1997: 127) can also be applied to Frost's music, and most certainly to his second studio album *East Side Story* **(**1992). On the album sleeve, Frost connects the seventeen songs of the album into one master narrative, 'a first-hand account of the lifestyle of a young Chicano growing up in the streets' [songs capitalized, emphases added]:

> I caught a case, and just like that I was in the PENITENTIARY. And in the *pinta* ['prison'], homeboy, there ain't NO SUNSHINE. My *ruca* ['girl'] started tripping, so I had to let her know that it's a THIN LINE between love and hate. Things were getting kinda crazy, so I started to feel a little SPACED OUT. But I couldn't stop, because THESE STORIES HAVE TO BE TOLD and I had an obligation to my HOME BOYZ ['friends'] to avoid the CHAOS ON THE STREETS OF EAST L.A. I played the *rola* ['song'] NO MORE WARS, and asked 'why can't the RAZA UNITE?'

Relevant issues for young Chicanos such as prison and *carnalismo* ['comradery'] are highlighted in songs like 'Penitentiary', 'No Sunshine' and 'Home Boyz', respectively. Songs with messages of peace and unity ('No More Wars', 'Raza Unite') are just as present. The album is a historical record for topics Chicano youth had to deal with in the early 1990s, but it also demonstrates how strongly Chicano rap is informed by *chicanismo*. To get a picture of the L.A. Frost was rapping about, Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990) is a perfect introduction. Davis puts the brutal street wars between police and gangs into context with the crack epidemic and the economic policies that further marginalized youth of colour, creating a vivid portrait of life in the Latino and Black neighbourhoods of L.A. In a revised edition, Davis (2006: ix) argues that 'L.A. remains vulnerable to the same explosive convergence of street anger, poverty, environmental crisis, and capital flight that made the early 1990s its worst crisis period since the early Depression.'

‘These Stories have to be told’ exemplifies Kelley’s ‘street ethnography’ especially well. The second verse tells the story of the young gang banger Huero who cannot escape his old life:

> so Huero started packing the *filero* [knife]
>
> cause the *calle* [the street], the *varrio* [the ‘hood], the block, the ghetto
>
> where all trying to get him
>
> he wanted out to forget his past but they wouldn’t let him
>
> so, he moved out of state and changed his name
>
> shit happens quick when you live the fast lane
>
> traveling the speed of light with no breaks
>
> do whatever you got to do and whatever it takes
>
> I know this story is getting kinda old
>
> but it has to be told

Frost’s storytelling forgoes judgement or condescending advice and offers a metaphor for gang youth across the country. Considering Frost’s involvement in anti-gang violence projects (Hochman 1990), this song underlines the activism that transcended his music throughout the 1990s.

Police brutality and racial profiling is omnipresent in the work of L.A. rappers, and Frost is no exception. ‘I Got Pulled Over’ is a feature with African-American rapper MC Eiht (Aaron Tyler) and fellow Chicano rapper A.L.T. (Alvin Trivette). The song uses skits of police radio, police officers speaking disrespectfully about African- and Mexican-Americans, and city soundscapes. The three rappers share experiences of police brutality after getting pulled over for no obvious reason. Frost’s character is enduring the harassment out of fear that the police officer ‘might beat me down just like he beat down Rodney King.’ *East Side Story* **(**1992) was released shortly after the L.A. riots broke out on April 29, 1992, following the not guilty verdict

of the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating. The reference to King is particularly relevant at the time, as the song captures the atmosphere in L.A. after the riots and the deep distrust towards the LAPD. Many artists treated the racial tension in L.A. in their music – some even a long time before the riots occurred; examples are N.W.A.'s 'Fuck the Police' (1988) and Ice Cube's 'Black Korea' (1991). Kelley (1996) contends that West Coast hip-hop foresaw the L.A. riots. It is no surprise, then, that the prevalence of racial profiling and police brutality is continuously voiced by both African- and Mexican-American artists during the 1990s. In acknowledging the shared struggle of people of colour in L.A., Frost is setting a positive example for Black and Brown cooperation in and outside the music industry – an issue with a long and complicated history in the City of Angels (see Kun and Pulido 2013; Johnson 2002).

CHICANO RAP & THE BORDERLANDS

From 1995 onwards, signifiers of Mexican culture and history become more evident in Frost's music. Frost's pan-Latino vision had already been present in his first super group's only album *Latin Alliance* (1991) that features MCs and producers of various Latino origins. Bilingual songs such as 'Latinos Unidos – United Latins' and 'Valla en Paz – Go in Peace' set the tone for politically and socially conscious Latino rap. Musically, however, the album is in key with Frost's early solo work, mostly drawing on Chicano rock and 'oldie' samples from the 1960s and '70s. Now, however, Frost's lyrical affirmation to his Mexican roots starts to actually meld with the music: the beats combine West Coast drums and snares with elements of Mexican folk music (*mariachi, corrido norteño*) while multi-lingual lyrics revolve around the drug trade, the US-Mexican border, Mexican heroes and Brown pride. Considering the political climate in the state of California this artistic development can be directly linked to Frost's socio-political environment.

The mid-1990s saw a difficult period in Mexican-US relations, that affected Mexican Americans as well, since they were racially profiled in the same way as illegal immigrants. In 1994, Proposition 187 – a policy aiming to keep undocumented immigrants from gaining access to education and health care – led to an anti-immigration backlash (Foley 2014). In the same year, the implementation of NAFTA coincided with Operation Gatekeeper. Without consulting with the Mexican government, Operation Gatekeeper started the militarization of the border and the construction of 'a 14-mile, 10-foot-high wall spanning the Tijuana San Ysidro border crossing in California just months after signing the trilateral NAFTA to eliminate trade barriers between Canada, the United States and Mexico' (Foley 2014: 199).[7] The juxtaposition of a free flow of goods and a restrained flow of people contradicted the conception of NAFTA at its core (Foley 2014). The agreement was very advantageous to the US economy, while the vital Mexican corn agriculture shrunk due to the fierce competition from US corn production. The subsequent rising unemployment resulted in heightened illegal migration to the US. In addition, since the US had successfully intercepted smuggling routes from Colombia through Florida and the Caribbean in the 1980s, Mexico advanced to become the primary transit centre for drugs from Latin America to the US. These developments were accompanied by an increase in violence that further spurred illegal migration North (Foley 2014). As Henderson (2011: 132) points out, 'the smuggling of illegal drugs and the smuggling of people have become increasingly intertwined'.

Frost's music reflects the closely related issues of migration, the drug trade and identity politics prevalent in the mid-1990s. Starting in releases from 1995, Frost begins bringing together Mexican folk music with lyrical content dealing with the US-Mexican borderlands, thus highlighting the close relationship between Chicano rap and (*narco-) corridos*. The *narcocorrido* is a transnational art form that deeply roots in the border shift of the Treaty of

[7] These measures were not unique to California, in fact similar operations were put into effect in Texas and Arizona (Foley 2014).

Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the subsequent conflicts between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans (Valenzuela Arce 2003). Morrison (2008: 379) has shown that US gangster rap and *narcocorridos* share 'fundamentally similar aesthetic and sociological underpinnings', while McFarland (2008: 17) stresses the *narcocorrido*'s 'resistant, even revolutionary' potential as the crucial influence on Chicano rap. Saldívar (1997: 61) summarizes three key features of *corridos*: 'a hero or protagonist, with whom the Chicano or Mexican audience is presumed to identify in some way; a world in which the hero acts and is acted on by antagonistic, often Anglocentric forces; … and an oral narrative'. All such features can be traced in Frost's work as he fused rap and *corridos* together, incorporating the *corrido*-narrative as well as musical borrowings from Mexican folk music.

'Bamseeya' off the 1995 album *Smile Now, Die Later* expresses Mexican pride on both musical and lyrical levels. The song combines a very melodic pattern of Spanish guitars and a heavy bass beat sampling the bassline of One Way's 'Cutie Pie' (1982). 'Bang-bang' sounds reminiscent of Western movies add details to the Wild West atmosphere, that is being set by both the Spanish guitars and the lyrics in symbiosis. Frost's lyrical self is 'a ruthless killer, filled with Mexican Pride', telling the story of 'a fool like Pancho Villa', who is evading the US Cavalry and killing anyone who gets in his way. Thereby, songwriter A.L.T. who frequently wrote lyrics for Frost expresses a part of Mexican history that is closely connected to border disputes and Mexican identity. References to Emiliano Zapata's famous quote 'I'd rather die on my feet, than live on my knees' make it abundantly clear that suppression by white America will not be tolerated.

Cruz (2015: 41) includes conscious Chicano rappers in his work on Mexican gangs and Latino activism in the US, noting that 'Bamseeya' 'speaks about the honoring of Raza heroes and not white murderers who have been glamorized in mainstream U.S. history books.'

> Kid Frost held up the 3 o'clock train

Smoked four fools [guys], and now they sound the same

Fuck Doc Holiday and Jesse James

I got my gun in my holster, my face on some posters

It's a three-day ride to the border

Outsmart the Marshall, fuck law and order

Similar to the muralist movement of the 1960s and '70s, that used public walls and buildings to educate about Chicano pride and history, Frost is using his music as a platform to raise the profile of Mexican heroes, whose stories were not taught in school.

'Mexican Border' is the opening track on Frost's 1997 album *When HelL.A. Freezes Over* and constitutes an early example of a Chicano rap song in *narcocorrido* fashion. Similar to 'Bamseeya', the beat combines a heavy-bassline with a Spanish guitar melody, but the story is definitely set in the present. Frost gives voice to a young Chicano who starts dealing drugs to make ends meet. While transporting narcotics from the Mexican state Sinaloa to L.A., he is pulled over by a police officer who calls him a 'beaner' (abusive term for Mexicans) and asks him to step out of the car. Acting in the heat of the moment, Frost's character shoots the cop instead of following the order to open up his trunk. The story unfolds into a downhill spiral, as the young man goes into hiding and is eventually 'headed down to the Mexican border' to avoid the consequences of his actions. The depiction of the police is hostile ('pig') and the violence against them almost seems belittled (Frost is laughing as shots are being fired). Frost never respected the police after experiencing their brutality himself on multiple occasions — so he might have expressed his anger about this in his lyrics. In comparison to 'I Got Pulled Over', where Frost still endured the harassment by the police, he is now fed up with years of police brutality. Staying true to his teaching motto, however, Frost's lyrical self is conscious about being in the wrong, but simply does not see any other option:

And so I just hide in the bushes by the stop light

Ey yo some might say that it's not right

But what am I to do?

Get a job, homie, check it

You got six felonies on your record

Man, do you think Pac-Tel's ever gonna want me? [Pac-Tel: telephone company]

The tattoos on my arms are gonna haunt me

Frost touches upon vital topics Chicano youth were and still are struggling with today: becoming involved with gangs at a young age; starting to deal drugs to make fast money; the difficulty of finding honest work as an ex-felon; racism; police brutality; and Brown-on-Brown crime. In the song, Mexico symbolizes a place of refuge – whether true home or last resort remains unclear – when life in the US becomes just too hard to bear. Frost perceives himself as a story teller, yet always committed to the truth. 'That's always been the most important thing to me, is what are we conveying as a story to tell these people about what we've gone through', he explains. 'And that's why you heard "Mexican Border" and you heard where I am going out there to take drugs back from Mexico… before *narcocorridos* – before any of that even started to grab in the mainstream.'

After the second verse, the music is interrupted by an excerpt of the motion picture *Touch of Evil* (1958). Mariachi music plays in the background, while a man with a Mexican accent says: 'He's got a reputation. He's got a young bride. He's gonna leave this town wishing he and that wife of his had never been born.' Orson Welles's *film noire* centres around two police investigators in a US-Mexican border town, a Mexican and an American, and plays with racist stereotypes and the hierarchy between Mexico and the US. Nericcio (1992: 57) describes the film as 'a true border text' that 'does not hide the wounds evident at the border'. Interestingly, *Touch of Evil* was released shortly after president Eisenhower had launched Operation Wetback in 1954, a program that was designed to deport illegal immigrants back to

Mexico in large numbers (Beckham 2005). Frost's use of this film draws a parallel between the 1990s, that saw extreme anti-immigration policies comparable to Operation Wetback, and the 1950s when policies and resentments against Mexicans were deepened by the role of media and film.

Two songs with similar characteristics can be found on Frost's last album before the millennium *That Was Then, This Is Now Vol. 1* (1999), supporting my argument that this current of Mexican music-based samples in combination with borderland content is getting stronger: 'Latin Kings' and '*Los Katrachos*'. Both songs feature Spanish guitar-themed beats and multilingual elements with Chicano rappers from California and Texas, and talk about Latin unity and drug trafficking. 'Latin Kings' is a feature with conscious rappers Mad One and Shysti from San Diego that starts with the hook: 'Latin Kings …Top notch players, dope rhyme sayers. *Latinos, tenemos que unirnos*' ['Latinos, we have to unite']. In the first verse, Mad One (Tomás López) raps about negative Latino stereotypes on TV and the difficulty to be a role model for the youth. He proceeds on the subjects of '*la frontera, mera mera* ['female boss'], the biggest border in the world', claiming that 'nobody moves more contraband than San Diego'. Shysti (Jesse Perez) follows almost completely in Spanish but switches to English to proclaim 'damn it feels good to feel Chicano'. Frost appears on the last verse of the song, as if to give precedence to the younger rappers. He is introducing himself as 'The Latin *rey* ['king'], above *la ley* ['the law'], Mr. old school *veterano* ['veteran'], from East L.A.' and talks about transporting drugs from San Ysidro, a San Diego district located directly at the border. The song unites border issues such as migration, drug trafficking, and negative profiling of Latinos in the US on a beat composed of a highly melodic brass Mariachi riff. Frost and his fellow Chicano rappers are calling for unity in order to cope with these matters, another attempt at a 'Latin Alliance', Frost's Latino rap crew that went separate ways after only one album in 1991.

'Los Katrachos' ['the purest'] is a feature with SPM (South Park Mexican, Carlos Coy), Mad One, Low-G (Wilson Flores) and Mr. Gee (George Ceja). The song starts out with a skit: Frost is on the phone with his boss, discussing a drug deal in a mix of Spanish and *caló*; Mexican news coverage about drug trafficking and the subsequent issues of violence and death is playing in the background. With feature artists from San Diego (Mad One) on the one hand, and SPM and Low-G from Houston, Texas, on the other, Frost expands the scope of drug trafficking between Mexico and the US from California to Texas. While SPM represents Texas ('*Tejas es mi tierra*', 'Texas is my land') in a mixture of Spanish and English, fellow Houston rapper Low-G's lyrics are almost entirely in Spanish. He is pointing to the violence drug trafficking incites 'from L.A. to Nueva Leon' (state in Mexico) in a melancholic tone: '*Aqui estoy/ perdido en la guerra/ rappeando, buscando otra manera*' ['Here I am, lost in the war, rapping, trying to find another way']. Low-G, who came to Texas as an illegal immigrant from Central America, draws a parallel between the war on drugs and the civil wars he was escaping. Low-G experienced difficulties adapting to the US and he was bullied for his accent in school. 'When I started rapping, I felt like I had to rap in English to defend myself and be equal', he remembers, and that it was SPM who encouraged him to rap in Spanish (Rodriguez 2010).

Although representing L.A. in this feature production, Frost mentions the Texas borderlands is his bars: 'from Brownsville to Brownsville, twenty-four-*siete*' ['24/7']. The cities Brownville, Texas, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, mark the last border point to the East, located on the Gulf Coast – the equivalent to San Diego/ Tijuana to the West. The song breaks after 3:28 minutes and the original beat is being drowned out by a *corrido* sung by Mariachi 2000:

> *Dicen que vienen del sur/ era un carro colorado*
>
> [they say they come from the south/ it was a red car]
>
> *trae 100 kilos de mota/ y van con rumba a Chicago*

[bringing 100 kilos of weed/ and they go in direction of Chicago]

Ya lo sabia el Frost/ que comanda el condado

[Frost already knew/ that he is ruling the county/territory]

Adding Chicago to the geographical canvas, Frost brings out the influence drug trafficking from Mexico exerts on all US territory, from the southern to the northern border. The lyrics also point to the augmented Mexican immigration, which by the early 1990s had become 'a national phenomenon, with Mexican immigrant colonies expanding in the Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest' (Henderson 2011: 132).

These songs are interesting historical sources on various levels as they demonstrate the intensification of Mexican signifiers in both music and lyrics. On the one hand, they reflect Frost's artistic development. Given that Frost went on hiatus between 1992 and 1995 to be a single parent, this new 'change in consciousness' (Kelly 1996: 101) might have had to do with him evolving as a father. It is possible that he started to question the transnational implications of raising a son in a Chicano community in the US. On the other hand, the historical resonance of this augmented 'Mexican-ness' calls attention to the socio-political environment in Los Angeles during the 1990s. On a linguistic and lyrical layer, Spanish appears to become more prominent: compared to earlier songs where English would dominate the syntax with Spanish and street slang sprinkled in, these songs show the opposite. This might be directly related to Proposition 227 – an initiative also referred to as 'English for the Children' that abolished bilingual education in California in 1998. Davis (2001: 141) criticizes this discrimination against the Spanish language as a breach with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 'which implicitly guaranteed the status of Spanish in the conquered borderlands of Mexico' after 1848. Davis also points out the interconnectedness of language, culture and identity which is very evident in Chicano rap as well.[8]

[8] See Davis (2001: 139-149) for further information on Proposition 227 and bilingual education policies in other US states.

Also, the imaging of motion pictures or dialogues is becoming more Spanish: while the excerpt of *Touch of Evil* in 'Mexican Border' is English with an exaggerated Mexican accent, indicating racial stereotypes in Cinema, the Spanish language *corrido* in 'Los Katrachos' is openly expressing pride for the Mexican culture. Although Frost is fusing *narcocorrido* and Chicano Rap stylistically, he still draws a line between glorifying the drug trade and pointing to its negative side effects. The lyrics are not just boasting about drug smuggling; the news footage in the beginning of the song is covering the negative side of cartels, drug trade and violence. In the '*corrido'* break in the song, however, Frost is praised as the man running the country, just as Mexican drug lords are praised in *narcocorridos*. The overlapping of original beat and *corrido* suggest that the realms of right and wrong are increasingly interwoven. Without deciding on one standpoint, Frost offers different perspectives on these complex issues that have dominated Mexican-US relations since the mid-1990s.

On a musical level, the use of Spanish guitars and Mariachi brass instruments underlines the message of the lyrics, placing the narrative in the US-Mexican borderlands. Frost was very conscious about putting together 'Mexican-tinged' beats with 'borderland' contents, claiming that 'it gives you identity.' The predominantly Spanish lyrics highlight the Latino presence in the US Southwest, all the while stressing language as a key identifier for young migrants' identity formation. Moreover, songs such as 'Los Katrachos' demonstrate that the artists' language, lyrical content, and beats add up to an overall work that clearly echoes the pulse of time.

CONCLUSION

Examining Chicano rap and punk alongside borderland literature, Saldívar (1997: 128) argues that 'cultural forms can no longer be exclusively located within the border patrolled boundaries of the nation state. Chicano/a America therefore defines itself as a central part of an

extended *frontera*.' In general agreement with Saldívar I would contend, however, that this dynamic does not necessarily originate in 'Chicano/a America'; the Chicano rappers in 'Los Katrachos' shift the agency to the border itself. Identifying the border as the personified *mera mera* ['female boss'] in the context of immigration and drug trafficking is a bold statement as it places blame on a larger structural problem in US-Mexican policies. In the beginning of the 2000s, numerous artists dedicated to the indigenous-Mexican roots started to enter the Chicano rap scene. The group Kinto Sol, who collaborated with Frost in 2012, frequently makes use of the phrase 'We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us'. Overtly pointing to the territorial implications of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on the Mexican-American diaspora, Kinto Sol also stress the agency of the border. In their narrative, the border was the one to cross (and divide) Mexican Americans and Mexicans – and not vice versa.

As Connell and Gibson suggest (2003: 271) 'music nourishes imagined communities, traces links to distant and past places.' In that sense, Chicano Rap productions are historical sources of the hybrid cultural history of Mexico and the US. Samples from the funk, soul, and Chicano rock spectrum connect the 1990s to the Black and Brown Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and '70s. Yet, Frost's storytelling goes back even further, drawing on historical figures and myths from the Mexican Revolution. Linking Chicano history to up-to-the minute topics such as gang violence, drug trafficking, and police brutality, Frost worked an educational aspect into his 'street ethnography'. He shared his own experience and aimed to keep Chicano youth away from gangs and out of prison. While certainly not all of his lyrics were autobiographical, Frost created narratives Chicano youth could identify with, and used his influence in the community to spread his messages. As Hochman (1990) points out, not everybody in the Chicano community agreed with Frost's approach and he also received criticism for his gangster aesthetics and violent lyrical content.

Constantly experimenting with sampling and imaging of Latino music and cinema, Frost developed a sound that is clearly connected to his Mexican roots. Songs such as 'Mexican Border' and 'Los Katrachos' bluntly talk about drug trafficking in the borderlands while establishing a closeness to Mexican musical culture at the same time. Frost's lyrical self is not confined to California, but moves freely in the US-Mexican borderlands. Los Angeles became known as the 'birthplace of Chicano Rap' (McFarland 2008: 35), yet Chicano rappers expanded their scope throughout the Southwest and built bridges between California and Texas, the two states with the highest Mexican-(American) presence. The frequent collaboration with Houston-based artist SPM underlines this artistic network. Frost's songs can be considered insightful historical sources for the 1990s, as he picks up political events such as the beating of Rodney King, Operation Gatekeeper, and NAFTA. While collaborations with African-American artists and references to the racial tensions in L.A. were prevalent in the early 1990s, the increasing collaboration with Chicano artists from outside of L.A. and the shift towards border issues gained importance in the mid-1990s. Uncovering issues and struggles of Mexican-American youth, his music can shed light on how language politics affect identity forging processes. The strengthening of Spanish lyrics in a time of anti-immigration backlash supports this argument, as the presented sources demonstrate.

We have seen that understanding the value of Chicano rap as a historical source is not readily evident and requires some decoding. Just as knowledge about Chicano history and popular culture offers a wider understanding of Frost's work, his work is pivotal when looking at Chicano rap today. Thus, analysing 1990s Chicano rap broadens the understanding of contemporary Chicano rappers, who are not signed to major labels but attract huge fanbases via social media and streaming platforms. Frost considers these rappers his 'babies … because every single one of them have a piece of my DNA embedded into their sound.' In fact, the signature elements of early Chicano rap are evident in the genre until today: multi-lingual lyrics,

street conscious content that is deeply rooted in Chicano culture and history, and West Coast rap beats infused with Latin and Mexican music inflections.

Still, it is important to point out that contemporary Chicano rap is much more diversified and many artists are moving beyond these musical influences. The content of Chicano rap lyrics is equally diverse: politically social conscious rappers voice political messages surrounding anti-immigration and free trade policy, while gangster rappers primarily rap about gang violence and life on the streets in their respective areas. Asking the 'Godfather of Chicano Rap' to define 'his' genre that is 30 years in the making, he replied: 'I would say representing diverse Latino cultures through music. It's a lot of diversity, and a lot of stories that still haven't been told yet.' Revisiting the song that inspired this article, listening to and re-telling these stories, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of what Chicano rap reveals about the history of Chicanos in the US.

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