While many Americans dismissed the borough of The Bronx in the late 1970s through the belief that »The Bronx is burning,« this study challenges that assumption. As the first explicit study on The Bronx in American popular culture, this book shows how a wide variety of cultural representations engaged in a complex dialogue on its past, present, and future. Sina A. Nitzsche argues that popular culture ushered in the poetic resurrection of The Bronx, an artistic and imaginative rebirth, that preceded, promoted, and facilitated the spatial revival of the borough.

Sina A. Nitzsche is the founder of the European Hiphop Studies Network and holds a PhD from the TU Dortmund. Her research interests include hip-hop, popular culture, urban, and media studies. She has also become one of the most renowned commenters on hip-hop culture in German media.

For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/en/978-3-8376-5311-3
# Table of Contents

**Preface** .................................................................................................................. 7

**Acknowledgements** ............................................................................................. 9

**Introduction**  
**Welcome to The Bronx** ....................................................................................... 11

**Chapter 1**  
**Approaching the Boogie Down:**  
**The Bronx, Popular Culture, and the Poetic Resurrection** ...................................... 17  
1.1 Mind the Gap: Historicizing The Bronx ................................................................. 18  
1.2 Exploring Urban Spaces: Popular, Media, and Convergence Cultures .................. 28  
1.3 Spectacular Ruins: Mapping the Era of Decline in The Bronx ............................... 33  
1.4 Beyond Ruins: The Poetic Resurrection ................................................................. 36

**Chapter 2**  
**The Bronx is Not Lost:**  
**Remembering the Success Story in Literature** .................................................. 45  
2.1 “I was the queen of my block”: Polish Immigration, Tremont Challenges, and Jewish American Female Empowerment in *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood* (1982) ......................................................................................................................... 47  
2.2 “I hoped we would not let happen to the entire world what we had let happen to The Bronx”: Highbridge Masculinity, Jewish Humor, and the Global Dimensions of Devastation in *Growing Up Bronx* (1984) ................................................................. 63  
2.3 “I was trading in my dreams of the fifties for a new beginning”: Kingsbridge Memories, Jewish American Masculinity, and Post-Industrial Well-Being in *The Old Neighborhood* (1980) ......................................................................................................................... 78  
2.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 91
Chapter 3
Zooming in on the Devastation:
The Bronx as an Urban Frontier in Film ................................................. 97
3.1 “It’s a fort in hostile territory, you understand?”: Colonial Encounters, Irish
3.2 “I hate kids, especially yours”: Italian American Domesticity,
Frontier Femininity, and Gangster Journeys in Gloria (1980) ....................................... 116
3.3 “South Bronx and Wall Street: They are both dead”: Gothic Ruins, Supernatural
3.4 Conclusion ............................................................................. 138

Chapter 4
Creating a New Popular Culture:
Re-Imagining the American Dream in Hip-Hop ................................. 145
4.1 “We are all graffiti artists”: Visual Creativity, Puerto Rican Romance, and a Local
Success Story in Wild Style (1982) ...................................................... 147
4.2 “It’s like a jungle sometimes”: Afrodisiastic Masculinity, Youth Resilience, and
4.3 “A self-starting culture”: Grassroots Agency, Media Diversity, and Coffee Table
4.4 Conclusion ............................................................................. 181

Conclusions
Global Dimensions of the Poetic Resurrection ................................. 185

Works Cited .................................................................................. 197
Acknowledgements
Introduction
Welcome to The Bronx

Shrinking cities have long fascinated popular culture and its audiences. One of the most iconic shrinking urban spaces of the twentieth century is certainly The Bronx borough of New York City. Suffering from deindustrialization, abandonment, and population loss, The Bronx became the synonym for the so-called urban crisis which started after the end of World War II. At the same time, the declining borough inspired may writers, filmmakers, photographers, and artists to create a multitude of stories about its downfall and eventual resurrection. Some of them have grown into mythic narratives and iconic images which continue to shape the perception and imagination of the borough. In my study entitled *Poetic Resurrection: The Bronx in American Popular Culture* I examine how popular culture represented The Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I show how those representations function as complex and contested fields of meaning where larger issues in American culture, such as race, class, gender, and ideology are negotiated.

Specifically, I argue in this book that the shrinking of The Bronx – contrary to the conventional wisdom – was a productive phase in terms of cultural production and in re-thinking American (urban) identities and narratives. I propose here that while the urban space of The Bronx suffered from the consequences of shrinkage in the 1970s, popular culture created a powerful artistic counter discourse which promotes the borough’s imaginary and spiritual rebirth. While The Bronx was disconnected from major American spatial and cultural narratives in the era of decline, popular culture reconnected The Bronx to such longstanding narratives as rags-to-riches, frontier, and the American Dream. I claim that these texts and narratives have functioned as a poetic resurrection, an artistic and imaginative rebirth of the borough, which preceded, promoted, and facilitated the spatial resurrection of The Bronx in the late twentieth century. The literary, and audio-/visual narratives therefore
do important cultural work because they lay the groundwork for the spatial and spiritual rebirth of The Bronx in the 1990s and 2000s thus reinforcing the mantra of neoliberal capitalism.

My interest in the declining Bronx in popular culture is certainly of autobiographical nature. I grew up in Eastern Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the midst of deindustrialization, population shrinkage, and an enormous wave of outmigration. The events of 1989 and the subsequent reunification resulted in large-scale factory closings because the former East German production plants could not compete of Western markets. As a consequence, the unemployment rate sharply increased, leaving some of my working-class family members jobless for years while others decided to emigrate to Western Germany in the search for better lives through steady, gainful employment. Although the abandoned industrial buildings in which my family and relatives used to work are sad symbols of this economic ‘development,’ they always fascinated my friends and me. We sneaked in and photographed what was left of the GDR textile production facilities. The bitter experience of post-reunification decline on the one hand and its liberating qualities on the other constitutes an important part of my adolescence.

Because of my experience of growing up in a shrinking region, my wish to explore The Bronx seemed only logical. When I decided to stay in the Kingsbridge Avenue area during my internship in New York City, I discovered a discrepancy between media representations and my own experiences. My white German friends imagined the borough to be a grim urban territory marked by decay and disaster based on what they had seen and read in the news, watched in movies, or heard in rap lyrics. When I arrived, I encountered a multifaceted and diverse place that resembled little of the dystopic film and news media imaginations. To me, then an (East) German graduate of American studies, The Bronx presented itself as a place with a rich cultural heritage and a vibrant street culture: for example, Spanish-speaking teenagers exchanged the latest neighborhood gossip on the sidewalk. My Irish American roommate introduced me to the history of my temporary lodging. The building’s history started with the arrival of her Irish immigrant grandparents in the 1920s and has remained a family residence ever since. The Bronx was not only far from being a one-dimensional danger zone, but a place with a multitude of stories, memories, and contested meanings.

This discrepancy between The Bronx in news media and popular culture as well as my personal upbringing in shrinking post-unification Eastern Germany triggered a set of questions regarding the function of decline in cultural
representations: How is this decline of the Bronx represented in popular culture? Which stories do cultural texts present and from which viewpoints? How do those representations reimagine long-standing cultural narratives? These questions of media representations, the public imagination, and my personal experience were the main sources of motivation for this research project.

My study scrutinizes different types of popular literary, audio-/visual, and musical texts. Literature is one of the oldest and most widely spread forms of expression in American culture. Hip-hop culture, a transnational Bronx-born youth musical and cultural movement, is the leading source of identity formation for young people, especially in the late twentieth century. Film is perhaps the most widespread audiovisual form throughout the twentieth century while photography is a very flexible medium which can be easily repurposed in different media forms. Other visual media such as flyers, posters, maps, and book covers are also discussed to show the cultural productivity in the era of decline in The Bronx. Cultural representations and pop cultural practices permanently write and re-write onto the urban space, thus, producing their own versions of the borough.

In this book, I understand The Bronx not only as a physical area, but as an imagined urban space which is expressed through various representations. Those spatial imaginations are connected to other formal features of media: Which genres dominate in which forms of expression and how do they influence spatial discourses and the American Dream narrative? Which narrative perspectives, types of characters, and modes of expression do we encounter across the texts and how do they comment on the idea of social upward mobility and the economic framework of (global) capitalism which is often blamed for the post-war downfall of American cities?

The objective of this study is to examine the representation of The Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As this time constitutes a period of larger shifts in American politics, economy, society, and culture, I investigate how those four areas are negotiated. The borough suffered from immense population and infrastructural decline as consequence of the larger post-World War II urban economic transformation processes, such as deindustrialization and (white) suburban flight. The news media reacted to this crisis by discounting The Bronx’ rich cultural heritage and blamed the non-white urban poor for the downfall of the borough. The news organizations channeled the fear of the so-called inner city by reducing the entire borough to the imagined space of the South Bronx. This public perception has become a myth and iconic image which is subverted in popular culture. Therefore I will show that in the late
1970 and early 1980s a much more diverse and complex image of The Bronx existed in popular media forms which prove the one-dimensional representation of the borough in the public perception to be wrong.

This study aims to be the first book-length analysis on cultural representations of the shrinking Bronx. So far, research on the borough has mostly been conducted from an urban history perspective. Using population statistics, questionnaires, and other empirically-derived documents, historical research lacks an approach of texts as representations, that is, as constructions – not mirrors – of ‘reality.’ This kind of research tends to overlook the many books, films, songs, or photographs that artists have produced about The Bronx which equally contribute to the various issues at work at a given time. Writing from a cultural studies point of view, I assume that ‘reality’ and urban spaces are not something naturally given, but permanently produced and reproduced in those texts. Its meaning is culturally constructed and changes over time. It is necessary to investigate these popular cultural representations and practices in order to examine the different meanings of the shrinking Bronx. What I am doing might thus be called Bronx Studies, bringing together urban and regional studies from cultural, media, and communication studies angles which examine the different spatial and mediated discourses of The Bronx and how they affirm, comment on, or distort its public perception.

In examining the narrative, visual, and medial dimensions of urban shrinkage processes, my book contributes to the larger academic discourse on cultural imaginaries of shrinking cities. Researchers from the fields of urban studies, geography, urban history, and spatial planning have often analyzed shrinking American urban contexts, such as The Bronx, Detroit, Flint, and Newark. They understand shrinking processes primarily in terms of spatial, demographic, infrastructural, historic, and public policy change. Scholars from those fields investigate how and why cities are shrinking around the globe, which repercussions those shrinking processes entail for the local populations, economies, and infrastructures, and which policies can be undertaken to re-size them in a sustainable way.

This book is not so much about settlement patterns, infrastructural projects, and public policy-making in the era of decline. It rather shifts the focus to a wide range of cultural texts which were produced in a specific shrinking context. It interrogates how they reflect on the cultural, social, racial, ethnic, gender, and economic dimensions, which are the causes and consequences of deindustrialization. While my case study explores one
particular urban territory, the spatial imaginaries analyzed here might help to build a larger framework of understanding of the cultural dimensions of contemporary shrinking processes in the United States and beyond.

My project raises an awareness of the complex connections between space, media, and popular culture. Spaces and places, as I will explain, cannot be viewed apart from the media constructing them. Media are produced and used by different social groups to present certain spaces and places and to attach a certain meaning to them at a given time. Media and pop cultural forms (including literature) provide a conceptual framework in which stories about spaces are told and make these stories accessible to different kinds of audiences. Finally, media can challenge the linear conceptualization of time by allowing a return to places of the past in the present time or by diachronically constructing spaces at various times. Space and media, as I will demonstrate, mutually influence each other. Accordingly, I understand the two concepts not as static categories, but as flexible phenomena which are culturally constructed and change over time. As such, they ultimately enable zones of cultural contact and contestation.

Assuming that "culture' is spatial" (D. Mitchell, Cultural Geography 63, emphasis in original), my book is located at the intersection between American studies, cultural studies, media studies, and urban studies. It seeks to contribute to the spatial turn, a postmodern (Bachmann-Medick 284) and multidisciplinary (Döring and Thielmann 10) tendency concerned with space as a central object of theoretical and empirical investigation. It points to the influence of cultural representations, media, and popular forms in which spatial representations take place. It also connects representations of hip-hop culture which received a fairly large academic interest especially in hip-hop studies with other literary and cinematic representations which were also produced in the era of decline in The Bronx.

Literature, the focus of my second chapter, recalls neighborhoods that were destroyed during the era of decline from a first-person perspective. In analyzing Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood (Kate Simon, 1982), The Old Neighborhood (Avery Corman, 1980), and Growing Up Bronx (Gerald Rosen, 1984), this section will discuss the question of how autobiography is used as the dominant genre and mode of articulation in literature. I will ask how autobiography functions to re-create The Bronx of the past and what this literary recreation means for the re-imagination of the rags-to-riches narrative.

In my third chapter I will show how film critiques the news media notion of urban devastation by the use of horror, gangster, or crime genres, such

Chapter 4 will examine how hip-hop culture emerged as a creative response to the devastation and decline of the South Bronx. Hip-hop is a special genre because it is not only an Afro-diasporic musical form, but a lived practice and multimedia youth culture. This chapter therefore analyzes the song and music video “The Message” (1982) and the film *Wild Style* (dir. Charlie Ahearn, 1982). It also illustrates how the photo book *Born in The Bronx: A Visual Record of the Early Days of Hip-Hop* (2007) showcases a similar pattern in personalizing the urban experience compared to film and literature. What do the hip-hop texts tell us about the meaning of the American Dream for a new generation of artists and activists? I will discuss not only the sense of artistic community that hip-hop creates in those representations, but also how this cultural practice transcends the boundaries of music by including film, photography, and, eventually, literature in its aesthetic portfolio.

The concluding chapter will discuss how the poetic resurrection of The Bronx in the era of decline continued to evolve and change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries across different media forms. Broadening the scope of my study, I will show how some of the mechanisms, discourses, debates of The Bronx of the 1970s and 1980s are reimagined and appropriated in contemporary shrinking city discourses in the United States. The final section therefore attempts to open up an arena in which the findings of my study might serve as a model to scrutinize the complexity and contestation of decline representations and its repercussions on spatial and cultural narratives in contemporary shrinking cities in the United States and on a global scale.

My next chapter will begin by investigating how The Bronx can be theorized as a heterotopia (Foucault), in how far decline and shrinkage are unique angles in urban studies and cultural studies, how the concept of representation ties in with urban decline and shrinkage, and how Henry Jenkins’s idea of convergence culture can be used as a methodological framework to study them. But why are there so few scholarly publications on representations of The Bronx to begin with?