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# RACE REBELS

## *Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*

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# Chapter 8

# Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics

## *"Gangsta Rap" and Postindustrial Los Angeles*

In ways that we do not easily or willingly define, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects "Americanism" itself.

—ROBERT WARSHOW, "The Gangster as a Tragic Hero"[1]

Oppressed peoples cannot avoid admiring their own nihilists, who are the ones dramatically saying "No!" and reminding others that there are worse things than death.

—EUGENE GENOVESE, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*[2]

### foreWORD: South Central Los Angeles, April 29, 1992

Believe it or not, I began working on this chapter well over a year before the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992, and at least two or three months before Rodney King was turned into a martyr by several police officers and a video camera.[3] Of course, the rebellion both enriched and complicated my efforts to make sense of gangsta rap in late twentieth-century Los Angeles. West Coast gangsta-flavored hip hop—especially in its formative stage—was, in some ways, a foreboding of the insurrection. The previous two years of "research" I spent rocking, bopping, and wincing to gangsta narratives of everyday life

were (if I may sample Mike Davis) very much like "excavating the future in Los Angeles." Ice T, truly the "OG" (Original Gangster) of L.A. gangsta rap, summed it up best in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview:

> When rap came out of L.A., what you heard initially was my voice yelling about South Central. People thought, "That shit's crazy," and ignored it. Then NWA [the rap group Niggas With Attitude] came and yelled, Ice Cube yelled about it. People said, "Oh, that's just kids making a buck." They didn't realize how many niggas with attitude there are out on the street. Now you see them.[4]

Indeed, though the media believes that the riots began with the shock of the beating of Rodney King, neither the hip hop community nor residents of South Central Los Angeles were really surprised by the videotape. Countless numbers of black Angelenos had experienced or witnessed this sort of terror before. When L.A. rapper Ice Cube was asked about the King incident on MTV, he responded simply, "It's been happening to us for years. It's just we didn't have a camcorder every time it happened." (Subsequently, Cube recorded "Who Got the Camera," a hilarious track in which he asks the police brutalizing him to hit him once more in order to get the event on film.)[5]

Few black Angelenos could forget the 1979 killing of Eula Mae Love, a five-feet four-inch, thirty-nine-year-old widow who was shot a dozen times by two LAPD officers. Police were called after she tried to stop a gas maintenance man from turning off her gas. When they arrived she was armed with a kitchen knife, but the only thing she stabbed was a tree in her yard. Nor could anyone ignore the fifteen deaths caused by LAPD chokeholds in the early eighties, or Chief Darryl Gates's infamous explanation: "We may be finding that in some blacks when [the chokehold] is applied the veins or arteries do not open up as fast as they do on normal people." And then there were the numerous lesser-known incidents for which no officers were punished. Virtually every South Central resident has experienced routine stops, if not outright harassment, and thousands of African American and Latino youth have had their names and addresses logged in the LAPD antigang task force data base—ironically, called a "rap sheet"—whether they were gang members or not.[6]

The L.A. rebellion merely underscores the fact that a good deal of



gangsta rap is (aside from often very funky music to drive to) a window into, and critique of, the criminalization of black youth. Of course, this is not unique to gangsta rap; all kinds of "B-boys" and "B-girls"—rappers, graffiti artists, break dancers—have been dealing with and challenging police repression, the media's criminalization of inner-city youths, and the "just-us" system from the get-go. Like the economy and the city itself, the criminal justice system changed just when hip hop was born. Prisons were no longer just places to discipline; they became dumping grounds to corral bodies labeled a menace to society. Policing in the late twentieth century was designed not to stop or reduce crime in inner-city communities but to manage it.[7] Economic restructuring resulting in massive unemployment has created criminals out of black youth, which is what gangsta rappers acknowledge. But rather than apologize or preach, most attempt to rationalize and explain. Virtually all gangsta rappers write lyrics attacking law enforcement agencies, their denial of unfettered access to public space, and the media's complicity in equating black youth with criminals. Yet, the rappers' own stereotypes of the ghetto as "war zone" and the black youth as "criminal," as well as their adolescent expressions of masculinity and sexuality, in turn structure and constrain their efforts to create a counternarrative of life in the inner city.

Indeed, its masculinist emphasis and pimp-inspired vitriol toward women are central to gangsta rap. While its misogynistic narratives are not supposed to be descriptions of everyday reality, they are offensive and chilling nonetheless. Of course, it can be argued that much of this adolescent misogyny is characteristic of most male youth cultures, since male status is defined in part through heterosexual conquest and domination over women. Part of what distinguishes gangsta rap from "locker room" braggadocio is that it is circulated on compact discs, digital tapes, and radio airwaves. But the story is so much more complicated than this. In order to make sense of the pervasiveness and appeal of the genre's misogyny, I also explore the traditions of sexism in black vernacular culture as well as the specific socioeconomic conditions in which young, urban African American males must negotiate their masculine identities.

Lest we get too sociological here, we must bear in mind that hip hop, irrespective of its particular "flavor," is music. Few doubt it has a message, whether they interpret it as straight-up nihilism or the

words of "primitive rebels." Not many pay attention to rap as art—the musical art of, for example, mixing "break beats" (the part of a song where the drums, bass, or guitar are isolated and extended via two turntables or electronic mixers); the verbal art of appropriating old-school "hustler's toasts"; or the art simply trying to be funny. Although what follows admittedly emphasizes lyrics, it also tries to deal with form, style, and aesthetics. As Tricia Rose puts it, "Without historical contextualization, aesthetics are naturalized, and certain cultural practices are made to appear essential to a given group of people. On the other hand, without aesthetic considerations, Black cultural practices are reduced to extensions of sociohistorical circumstances."[8]

Heeding Rose's call for a more multilayered interpretation of cultural forms that takes account of context *and* aesthetics, politics *and* pleasure, I will explore the politics of gangsta rap—its lyrics, music, styles, roots, contradictions, and consistencies—and the place where it seems to have maintained its deepest roots: Los Angeles and its black environs. To do this right we need a historical perspective. We need to go back . . . way back, to the dayz of the O[riginal] G[angster]s. This, then, is a tale of very recent and slightly less recent urban race rebels, a tale that cannot be totally separated from black workers' sabotage in the Jim Crow South or young black passengers' "acting up" on streetcars in wartime Birmingham. Still, these more recent tales of rebellion, which highlight the problems of gangsta rappers against a background of racial "progress," reveal that the black working class of the late twentieth-century city faces a fundamentally different reality—the postindustrial city.

## OGs in Postindustrial Los Angeles: Evolution of a Style

L.A. might be the self-proclaimed home of gangsta rap, but black Angelenos didn't put the gangsta into hip hop. Gangsta lyrics and style were part of the whole hip hop scene from its origins in the South Bronx during the mid-1970s. In Charlie Ahearn's classic 1982 film *Wild Style* about the early hip hop scene in New York, the rap duo Double Trouble stepped on stage decked out in white "pimp-style" suits, matching hats, and guns galore. Others in the film are "strapped" (armed) as well, waving real guns as part of the act. The



scene seems so contemporary, and yet it was shot over a decade before the media paid attention to such rap songs as Onyx's "Throw Ya Guns in the Air."[9]

But to find the roots of gangsta rap's violent images, explicit language, and outright irreverence, we need to go back even further. Back before Lightin' Rod (aka Jalal Uridin of the Last Poets) performed toasts (narrative poetry from the black oral tradition) over live music on a popular album called *Hustlers' Convention* in 1973; before Lloyd Price recorded the classic black baaadman narrative, "Stagger Lee," in 1958; even before Screamin' Jay Hawkins recorded his explicitly sexual comedy "rap" "Alligator Wine." Indeed, in 1938 folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Jelly Roll Morton performing a number of profane and violent songs out of the black vernacular, including "The Murder Ballad" and "Make Me a Pallet on the Floor." Morton's lyrics rival the worst of today's gangsta rappers: "Come here you sweet bitch, give me that pussy, let me get in your drawers/I'm gonna make you think you fuckin' with Santa Claus." In other words, we need to go back to the blues, to the baaadman tales of the late nineteenth century, and to the age-old tradition of "signifying" if we want to discover the roots of the "gangsta" aesthetic in hip hop. Irreverence has been a central component of black expressive vernacular culture, which is why violence and sex have been as important to toasting and signifying as playfulness with language. Many of these narratives are about power. Both the baaadman and the trickster embody a challenge to virtually *all* authority (which makes sense to people for whom justice is a rare thing), creates an imaginary upside-down world where the oppressed are the powerful, and it reveals to listeners the pleasures and price of reckless abandon. And in a world where male public powerlessness is often turned inward on women and children, misogyny and stories of sexual conflict are very old examples of the "price" of being baaad.[10]

Nevertheless, while gangsta rap's roots are very old, it does have an identifiable style of its own, and in some respects it is a particular product of the mid-1980s. The inspiration for the specific style we now call gangsta rap seems to have come from Philadelphia's Schooly D, who made *Smoke Some Kill*, and the Bronx-based rapper KRS 1 and Scott La Rock of Boogie Down Productions, who released *Criminal Minded*. Although both albums appeared in 1987, these rappers had

been developing an East Coast gangsta style for some time. Ice T, who started out with the technopop wave associated with Radio and Uncle Jam's Army (recording his first single, "The Coldest Rap," in 1981), moved gangsta rap to the West Coast when he recorded "6 in the Mornin'" in 1986. Less than a year later, he released his debut album, *Rhyme Pays*.[11]

Ice T was not only the first West Coast gangsta-style rapper on wax, but he was himself an experienced OG whose narratives were occasionally semi-autobiographical or drawn from things he had witnessed or heard on the street. A native of New Jersey who moved to Los Angeles as a child, "T" (Tracy Marrow) joined a gang while at Crenshaw High School and began a very short career as a criminal. He eventually graduated from Crenshaw, attended a junior college, and, with practically no job prospects, turned to the armed services. After four years in the service, he pursued his high school dream to become a rapper and starred in a documentary film called "Breaking and Entering," which captured the West Coast break dance scene. When Hollywood made a fictionalized version of the film called "Breakin'," Ice T also made an appearance. Although Ice T's early lyrics ranged from humorous boasts and tales of crime and violence to outright misogyny, they were clearly as much fact as fiction. In "Squeeze the Trigger" he leads off with a brief autobiographical, composite sketch of his gangsta background, insisting all along that he is merely a product of a callous, brutal society.[12]

Even before *Rhyme Pays* hit the record stores (though banned on the radio because of its explicit lyrics), an underground hip hop community was forming in Compton, a predominantly black and Latino city south of Los Angeles, that would play a pivotal role in the early history of gangsta rap. Among the participants was Eric Wright—better known as Eazy E—who subsequently launched an independent label known as Ruthless Records. He eventually teamed up with Dr. Dre and Yella, both of whom had left the rap group World Class Wreckin Cru, and Ice Cube, who was formerly a member of a group called The CIA. Together they formed Niggas With Attitude and moved gangsta rap to another level. Between 1987 and 1988, Ruthless produced a string of records, beginning with their twelve-inch *NWA and the Posse*, Eazy E's solo album, *Eazy Duz It*, and the album which put NWA on the map, *Straight Outta Compton*.[13] Dr. Dre's brilliance as a producer—his introduction of hard, menacing beats, sparse drum tracks, and heavy bass with slower tempos—and Ice Cube's genius as a lyricist, made NWA one of the most compelling groups on the hip hop scene in years.



A distinctive West Coast style of gangsta rap, known for its rich descriptive storytelling laid over heavy funk samples[14] from the likes of George Clinton and the whole Parliament-Funkadelic family, Sly Stone, Rick James, Ohio Players, Average White Band, Cameo, Zapp and, of course, the Godfather himself—James Brown—evolved and proliferated rapidly soon after the appearance of Ice T and NWA. The frequent use of Parliament-Funkadelic samples led one critic to dub the music "G-Funk (gangsta attitude over P-Funk beats)."[15] Within three years, dozens of Los Angeles-based groups came onto the scene, many produced by either Eazy E's Ruthless Records, Ice T and Afrika Islam's Rhyme Syndicate Productions, Ice Cube's post-NWA project, Street Knowledge Productions, or Dr. Dre's Deathrow Records. The list of West Coast gangsta rappers includes Above the Law, Mob Style, Compton's Most Wanted, King Tee, The Rhyme Syndicate, Snoop Doggy Dogg, (Lady of) Rage, Poison Clan, Capital Punishment Organization (CPO), the predominantly Samoan Boo-Yaa Tribe, the DOC, DJ Quick, AMG, Hi-C, Low Profile, Nu Niggaz on the Block, South Central Cartel, Compton Cartel, 2nd II None, W.C. and the MAAD (Minority Alliance of Anti-Discrimination) Circle, Cypress Hill, and Chicano rappers like Kid Frost and Proper Dos.

Although they shared much with the larger hip hop community, gangsta rappers drew both praise and ire from their colleagues. Indeed, gangsta rap has generated more debate both within and without the hip hop world than any other genre.[16] Unfortunately, much of this debate, especially in the media, has only disseminated misinformation. Thus, it is important to clarify what gangsta rap *is not*. First, gangsta rappers have never merely celebrated gang violence, nor have they taken a partisan position in favor of one gang over another. Gang bangin' (gang participation) itself has never even been a central theme in the music. Many of the violent lyrics are not intended to be literal. Rather, they are boasting raps in which the imagery of gang bangin' is used metaphorically to challenge competitors on the microphone—an element common to all hard-core hip hop. The mic becomes a Tech-9 or AK-47, imagined drive-bys occur from the stage, flowing

lyrics become hollow-point shells. Classic examples are Ice Cube's "Jackin' for Beats," a humorous song that describes sampling other artists and producers as outright armed robbery, and Ice T's "Pulse of the Rhyme" or "Grand Larceny" (which brags about stealing a show), Capital Punishment Organization's aptly titled warning to other perpetrating rappers, "Homicide," NWA's "Real Niggaz," Dr. Dre's "Lyrical Gangbang," Ice Cube's, "Now I Gotta Wet'cha," Compton's Most Wanted's "Wanted" and "Straight Check N' Em." Sometimes, as in the case of Ice T's "I'm Your Pusher," an antidrug song that boasts of pushing "dope beats and lyrics/no beepers needed," gangsta rap lyrics have been misinterpreted by journalists and talk show hosts as advocating criminality and violence.[17]

This is not to say that all descriptions of violence are simply metaphors. Exaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices. Performances like The Rhyme Syndicate's "My Word Is Bond" or J.D.'s storytelling between songs on Ice Cube's *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* are supposed to be humorous and, to a certain extent, unbelievable. Growing out of a much older set of cultural practices, these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the "baddest motherfucker around." They are not meant as literal descriptions of violence and aggression, but connote the playful use of language itself. So when J.D. boasts about how he used to "jack them motherfuckers for them Nissan trucks," the story is less about stealing per se than about the way in which he describes his bodaciousness.[18]

When gangsta rappers do write lyrics intended to convey a sense of social realism, their work loosely resembles a sort of street ethnography of racist institutions and social practices, but told more often than not in the first person. Whether gangsta rappers step into the character of a gang banger, hustler, or ordinary working person—that is, products and residents of the "'hood"—the important thing to remember is that they are stepping into character; it is for descriptive purposes rather than advocacy. In some ways, these descriptive narratives, under the guise of objective "street journalism," are no less polemical (hence political) than nineteenth-century slave narratives in defense of abolition. When Ice Cube was still with NWA he explained, "We call ourselves underground street reporters. We just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing less."[19]



It would be naive to claim that descriptive lyrics, as an echo of the city, do not, in turn, magnify what they describe—but to say so is a far cry from claiming that the purpose of rap is to advocate violence. And, of course, rappers' reality is hardly "objective" in the sense of being detached; their standpoint is that of the ghetto dweller, the criminal, the victim of police repression, the teenage father, the crack slanger, the gang banger, and the female dominator. Much like the old "baaadman" narratives that have played an important role in black vernacular folklore, the characters they create, at first glance, appear to be apolitical individuals only out for themselves; and like the protagonist in Melvin Van Peebles's cinematic classic, *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadass Song*, they are reluctant to trust anyone. It is hard not to miss the influences of urban toasts and "pimp narratives," which became popular during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In many instances the characters are almost identical, and on occasion rap artists pay tribute to black vernacular oral poetry by lyrically "sampling" these early pimp narratives.[20]

For other consumers of gangsta rap, such as middle-class white males, the genre unintentionally serves the same role as blaxploitation films of the 1970s or, for that matter, gangster films of any generation. It attracts listeners for whom the "ghetto" is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom. White music critic John Leland once praised NWA because they "dealt in evil as fantasy: killing cops, smoking hos, filling quiet nights with a flurry of senseless buckshot." This kind of voyeurism partly explains NWA's huge white following and why their album, *Efil4zaggin*, shot to the top of the charts as soon as it was released. As one critic put it, "In reality, NWA have more in common with a Charles Bronson movie than a PBS documentary on the plight of the inner-cities." And why should it be otherwise? After all, NWA members have even admitted that some of their recent songs were not representations of reality "in the hood" but inspired by popular films like *Innocent Man* starring Tom Selleck and *Tango and Cash* starring Sylvester Stallone and Kurt Russell.[21]

While I'm fully aware that some rappers are merely "studio gangstas," and that the *primary* purpose of this music is to produce "funky dope rhymes" for our listening pleasure, we cannot ignore the fact that West Coast gangsta rap originated in, and continues to main-

tain ties to, the streets of L.A.'s black working-class communities. The generation that came of age in the 1980s was the product of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back at least to the late 1960s. While the city as a whole experienced unprecedented growth, the communities of Watts and Compton faced increased economic displacement, factory closures, and an unprecedented deepening of poverty. The uneven development of L.A.'s postindustrial economy meant an expansion of high-tech firms like Aerospace and Lockheed, and the disappearance of rubber and steel manufacturing firms, many of which were located in or near Compton and Watts. Deindustrialization, in other words, led to the establishment of high-tech firms in less populated regions like Silicon Valley and Orange County. Developers and local governments helped the suburbanization process while simultaneously cutting back expenditures for parks, recreation, and affordable housing in inner-city communities. Thus since 1980 economic conditions in Watts deteriorated on a greater scale than in any other L.A. community, and by some estimates Watts is in worse shape now than in 1965. A 1982 report from the California Legislature revealed that South Central neighborhoods experienced a 50 percent rise in unemployment while purchasing power dropped by one-third. The median income for South Central L.A.'s residents was a paltry $5,900—$2,500 below the median income for the black population a few years earlier.

Youth were the hardest hit. For all of Los Angeles County, the unemployment rate of black youth remained at about 45 percent, but in areas with concentrated poverty the rate was even higher. As the composition of L.A.'s urban poor becomes increasingly younger, programs for inner-city youth are being wiped out at an alarming rate. Both the Neighborhood Youth Corps and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) have been dismantled, and the Jobs Corps and Los Angeles Summer Job Program have been cut back substantially.[22]

Thus, on the eve of crack cocaine's arrival on the urban landscape, the decline in employment opportunities and growing immizeration of black youth in L.A. led to a substantial rise in property crimes committed by juveniles and young adults. Even NWA recalls the precrack illicit economy in a song titled "The Dayz of Wayback," in which Dr. Dre and M. C. Ren wax nostalgic about the early to mid-1980s, when



criminal activity consisted primarily of small-time muggings and robberies.[23] Because of its unusually high crime rate, L.A. had by that time gained the dubious distinction of having the largest urban prison population in the country. When the crack economy made its presence felt in inner-city black communities, violence intensified as various gangs and groups of peddlers battled for control over markets. In spite of the violence and financial vulnerability that went along with peddling crack, for many black youngsters it was the most viable economic option.[24]

While the rise in crime and the ascendance of the crack economy might have put money into some people's pockets, for the majority it meant greater police repression. Watts, Compton, Northwest Pasadena, Carson, North Long Beach, and several other black working-class communities were turned into war zones during the mid- to late 1980s. Police helicopters, complex electronic surveillance, even small tanks armed with battering rams became part of this increasingly militarized urban landscape. During this same period, housing projects, such as Imperial Courts, were renovated along the lines of minimum security prisons and equipped with fortified fencing and an LAPD substation. Imperial Court residents were now required to carry identity cards and visitors were routinely searched. As popular media coverage of the inner city associated drugs and violence with black youth, young African Americans by virtue of being residents in South Central L.A. and Compton were subject to police harassment and, in some cases, feared by older residents.[25]

All of these problems generated penetrating critiques by gangsta rappers. M. C. Ren, for example, blamed "the people who are holding the dollars in the city" for the expansion of gang violence and crime, arguing that if black youth had decent jobs, they would not need to participate in the illicit economy. "It's their fault simply because they refused to employ black people. How would you feel if you went for job after job and each time, for no good reason, you're turned down?"[26] Ice T blames capitalism entirely, which he defines as much more than alienating wage labor; the marketplace itself as well as a variety of social institutions are intended to exercise social control over African Americans. "Capitalism says you must have an upper class, a middle class, and a lower class. . . . Now the only way to guarantee a lower class, is to keep y'all uneducated and as high as possible."[27] Ac-

cording to Ice T, the ghetto is, at worst, the product of deliberately oppressive policies, at best, the result of racist neglect. Nowhere is this clearer than in his song "Escape from the Killing Fields," which uses the title of a recent film about the conflict in Cambodia as a metaphor for the warlike conditions in today's ghettos.[28]

Gangsta rappers construct a variety of first-person narratives to illustrate how social and economic realities in late capitalist L.A. affect young black men. Although the use of first-person narratives is rooted in a long tradition of black aesthetic practices,[29] the use of "I" to signify both personal and collective experiences also enables gangsta rappers to navigate a complicated course between what social scientists call "structure" and "agency." In gangsta rap there is almost always a relationship between the conditions in which these characters live and the decisions they make. Some gangsta rappers—Ice Cube in particular—are especially brilliant at showing how, if I may paraphrase Marx, young urban black men make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing.

## "Broke Niggas Make the Best Crooks"[30]

> The press is used to make the victim look like the criminal and make the criminal look like the victim.
>
> —MALCOLM X, "Not Just an American Problem"[31]

In an era when popular media, conservative policy specialists, and some social scientists are claiming that the increase in street crime can be explained by some pathological culture of violence bereft of the moderating influences of a black middle class (who only recently fled to the suburbs), L.A.'s gangsta rappers keep returning to the idea that joblessness and crime are directly related.[32] Consider W.C. and the MAAD Circle's manifesto on the roots of inner-city crime. Its title, "If You Don't Work, U Don't Eat," appropriates Bobby Byrd's late 1960s' hit song of the same title (it, too, is sampled), and replicates a very popular Old Left adage. Describing the song in a recent interview, W.C. explained the context in which it was conceived: "I've got to feed a family. Because I don't have [job] skills I have no alternative but to turn this way. My little girl don't take no for an answer, my little boy don't take no for an answer, my woman's not going to take no for an answer, so I gotta go out and make my money."[33] In the song, members from his own crew as well as guest artists (M. C. Eiht from Compton's Most Wanted [CMW] and J.D. from Ice Cube's posse, Da Lench Mob) each give their own personal perspective on how they (or their character) became criminals. For MAAD Circle rapper Coolio, crime is clearly a means of survival, though he is fully cognizant that each job he pulls might lead to death or incarceration.[34] M. C. Eiht (pronounced "eight") of CMW openly declares that crime is his way of resisting wage labor ("I ain't punchin' a clock"), but admits with some remorse that his victims are usually regular black folk in the hood. Unless conditions change, he insists, neighborhood crime will continue to be a way of life.[35]



Ice Cube's "A Bird in the Hand," from his controversial album *Death Certificate*, is about the making of a young drug peddler. In this narrative, Cube plays a working-class black man just out of high school who can't afford college and is consistently turned down for medium-wage service-sector jobs. Because he is also a father trying to provide financial support for his girlfriend and their baby, he decides to take the only "slave" (job) available—at McDonald's. As the bass line is thumpin' over well-placed samples of screaming babies in the background, Ice Cube looks for another way out. It does not take much reflection for him to realize that the drug dealers are the only people in his neighborhood making decent money. Although his immediate material conditions improve, he now must face constant hounding from police and the mass media: "Now you put the feds against me/ Cause I couldn't follow the plan of the presidency/ I'm never gettin' love again/ But blacks are too fuckin' broke to be Republican." In the end, the blame for the rapid expansion of crack is placed squarely on the Bush administration. "Sorry, but this is our only room to walk/ Cause we don't want to drug push/ But a bird in the hand, is worth more than a Bush."[36]

The characters in gangsta narratives defy our attempts to define them as Robin Hoods or "criminal-criminals."[37] The very same voices we hear "jackin'" (robbing) other brothers and sisters occasionally call on male gangsters to turn their talents against the state. In "Get up off that Funk," W.C. and the MAAD Circle take a sort of Robin Hood stand, declaring that their own agenda includes jackin' the powerful and distributing the wealth. Rapping over a heavy bass and trap

drum, reminiscent of the hardcore "go-go" music one hears in the darker side of the nation's capital, W.C. describes the Minority Alliance of Anti-Discrimination as an organization intent on stealing from the rich to give "to the poor folks in the slums."[38]

Ice Cube takes the Robin Hood metaphor a step further, calling for the "ultimate drive-by" to be aimed at the U.S. government. In a recent interview, he even suggested that gang bangers "are our warriors. . . . It's just they're fighting the wrong gang." The gang they ought to be fighting, he tells us, is "the government of the United States."[39] "I Wanna Kill Sam" on his album *Death Certificate* is his declaration of gang warfare on America. It begins with Cube loading up his "gat" in anticipation of taking out the elusive Uncle Sam. Following a brief interlude—a fictional public service announcement on behalf of the Armed Services—Cube gives us his own version of American history in which the slave trade, forced labor in the era of freedom, and army recruitment are all collapsed into a single narrative of racist repression and exploitation. He then connects the "pasts" to the present, suggesting that while the same old racism still lingers, the victims are unwilling to accept the terms of order. Instead of retreats and nonviolent protests, there will be straight jackin', gangsta style. Da Lench Mob's "Guerrillas in tha Midst" takes its title from an infamous LAPD term describing African Americans in the vicinity, which itself puns on the popular film set in Africa titled *Gorillas in the Mist*. But for Da Lench Mob, the "gorillas" are America's nightmare, organized and armed gangstas ready for the Big Payback.[40]

Of course, the idea of street gangs like the Crips and Bloods becoming a revolutionary guerrilla army seems ludicrous, especially given the role street gangs have assumed as protectors of the illicit economy. Consider the words of a Chicano gang member from Los Angeles: "I act like they do in the big time, no different. There ain't no corporation that acts with morals and that ethics shit and I ain't about to either. As they say, if it's good for General Motors, it's good enough for me."[41] Hardly the stuff one would expect from an inner-city rebel. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that the hip hop generation consumed movies like *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, a film version of Sam Greenlee's novel about a former black CIA agent who uses his training to turn gang members into a revolutionary army. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* convinced unknown numbers



of kids that even second-rate gangsters can become political radicals. It's possible that a few black Angelenos absorbed some OG oral history about the gang roots of the Black Panther Party. L.A. Panther leaders Bunchy Carter and John Huggins were former members of the Slausons gang, and their fellow banger, Brother Crook (aka Ron Wilkins), founded the Community Alert Patrol to challenge police brutality in the late 1960s. And the postrebellion role of gang leaders in drafting and proposing the first viable plan of action to rebuild South Central Los Angeles cannot be overlooked. Indeed, much like today, both the presence of the Nation of Islam and the rise in police brutality played pivotal roles in politicizing individual gang members.[42]

By treating crime as a mode of survival and as a form of rebellion, gangsta rappers partly serve to idealize criminal activity. However, they also use the same narrative strategies—the use of first-person autobiographical accounts or the ostensibly more objective "street journalism"—to criticize inner-city crime and violence. Songs like Ice T's "Pain," "6 in the Mornin,'" "Colors," "New Jack Hustler," and "High Rollers"; Ice Cube's "Dead Homiez" and "Color Blind"; NWA's "Alwayz into Somethin'"; Cypress Hill's "Hand on the Pump" and "Hole in the Head"; and the gangsta groups that participated in making "We're All in the Same Gang" express clear messages that gang banging and jackin' for a living usually ends in death or incarceration—that is, if you're caught.[43] CPO's "The Wall" (as well as "The Movement," and sections from "Gangsta Melody"), performed by their quick-tongued lead lyricist Lil Nation, rail against drive-by shootings, the rising rate of black-on-black homicide, and brothers who try to escape reality by "Cold drinkin' 8-ball." Lil Nation even breaks with the majority of his fellow gangsta rappers by announcing that black youth today need more religion, a better set of values, and a radical social movement.[44]

Most gangsta rappers, however, are not so quick to criticize violence, arguing that it is the way of the street. This reticence is certainly evident in Ice Cube's advice that "if you is or ain't a gang banger/ keep one in the chamber" as well as his tongue-in-cheek call to replace guard dogs with guns ("A Man's Best Friend"). Even his anti-gang song, "Color Blind," implies that inner-city residents should be armed and ready in the event of a shoot-out or attempted robbery.

Likewise, MAAD Circle rappers Coolio and W.C. emphasize the need for protection. Although they both agree that gang banging will ultimately lead to death or prison, they also realize that "rolling with a crew" serves the same purpose as carrying a gun. As Coolio points out, "They say on the radio and TV that you have a choice, but it's bullshit. If you're getting your ass whipped everyday, you've got to have some protection."[45]

The gendering of crime also helps explain why gangsta rappers are reluctant to denounce violence, why the criminals in their narratives are almost always men, and why, in part, violence against women appears consistently in the music of many gangsta groups. As criminologist James Messerschmidt reminds us, "Throughout our society . . . violence is associated with power and males, and for some youth this association is reinforced as part of family life. As a result, most young males come to identify the connection between masculinity-power-aggression-violence as part of their own developing male identities." Being a man, therefore, means not "taking any shit" from anyone, which is why the characters in gangsta rap prefer to use a gat rather than flee the scene, and why drive-by shootings are often incited by public humiliations. Second, although it might be argued that men dominate these narratives because they construct them, it is also true that the preponderance of street crime is committed by marginalized males. The matter is far too complicated to discuss in detail here, but several scholars attribute these patterns to higher rates of male unemployment, greater freedom from the restraints of the household compared to females (i.e., more opportunities to engage in criminal activity), and a patriarchal culture that makes earning power a measure of manhood.[46]

The misogyny of gangsta rap is deeply ingrained. Most gangsta rappers take violence against women for granted. It is primarily the dark, nasty side of *male-on-male* street violence that they attempt to illustrate. Sir Jinx's use of documentary-style recordings of simulated drive-by's and fights that escalate into gun battles are intended to deromanticize gang violence.[47] A much more clear-cut example is CMW's "Drive By Miss Daisy," a powerful, complex depiction of the ways in which ordinary bystanders can become victims of intergang warfare. The story begins with a young man assigned to assassinate a rival gangbanger who had just killed his homie. Afraid and intimidated, he decides to get drunk before calling his posse together for the drive-by. When they finally pull up in front of the house, he is apparently unaware that the boy's mother is in the kitchen cooking dinner. Just before he pulls the trigger his conscience intervenes for a second and he questions the morality of his actions. But because of gang loyalty, he does the deed just the same.



What makes the song so compelling is its music. Although CMW had already established a reputation among gangsta rappers for employing more laid-back jazz and quiet storm tracks than hardcore funk, their choice of music in "Drive By" was clearly intended to heighten the intensity rather than provide an understated backdrop for their lead rapper. Thus we hear straight-ahead modal jazz circa 1960s—heavy ride and crash cymbals and acoustic bass beneath the laid-back and strangely cartoonish, high-pitched voice of M. C. Eiht. The two instrumental interludes are even more powerful. The bass and cymbal combination is violently invaded by an acoustic piano playing strong, dissonant block chords very much in the vein of Don Pullen or Stanley Cowell. Mixed in are the sounds of automatic weapons, a looped sample of blood-curdling screams that has the effect of creating an echo without reverberation, and samples of would-be assassins hollering "you die motherfucker." This disturbing cacophony of sounds all at once captures the fragility of human life, the chaos of violent death, and the intensity of emotions young murderers and their victims must feel.[48]

Ice Cube's "Dead Homiez" uses a graveyard to reflect on the tragedy of inner-city homicide. An able storyteller, he is especially effective at painting a detailed picture of his homie's funeral, interrupting periodically with loving as well as frustrating memories of his dead friend. No matter how many forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor he downs, his friend's death continues to haunt him: "Still hear the screams from his mother/as my nigger lay dead in the gutter." The anger, pain, confusion, and fear of those left behind are all inscribed in the ritual of mourning.[49]

Drug dealers have been a common target of gangsta rap from the beginning. One of NWA's very first releases, "Dope Man," offers some brutal insights into the effects of the rising crack cocaine economy. Screamed over electronic drum tracks and a Middle Eastern–sounding reed instrument, Dr. Dre first declares that "If you smoke 'caine

you a stupid motherfucker" and then goes on to describe some nameless "crackhead" whose habit forced him into a life of crime.[50] CPO's "The Movement" and "The Wall" wage frontal attacks on all pushers, whom he accuses of committing genocide against black people; he advocates a social movement to wipe them out, since law enforcement is half-hearted and the justice system both inept and corrupt.[51]

Because most gangsta rappers simultaneously try to explain why people turn to drug dealing and other assorted crimes, and vehemently attack drug dealers for the damage they do to poor black communities, they have often been accused of being inconsistent, contradictory, or even schizophrenic. For example, on the same album with "A Bird in the Hand," Ice Cube includes an uncompromising attack on drug dealers, calling them "killers" and insisting that they exploit black people "like the caucasians did."[52] That Cube finds nothing redeeming in the activities of crack peddlers underscores the point that his descriptions are not intended as advocacy. His effort to explain why the drug trade is so appealing to some inner-city residents is not an uncritical acceptance of it. Indeed, "My Summer Vacation," a third song on his *Death Certificate* album about the crack economy, not only reveals the immense violence that goes along with carving out new markets, but borrows from typical images of legitimate entrepreneurship to argue that legal and illicit capitalism are two sides of the same coin—both are ruthless, exploitative, and often produce violence. The point is certainly not to glorify violence. Similarly, Ice T, in "New Jack Hustler," not only suffers from a "capitalist migraine" but asks if the luxury he enjoys as a big-time drug dealer is "a nightmare, or the American dream?" His implication is clear, for this particular enterprise leads to death, destruction, and violence rather than accumulation and development.[53]

Let me not overstate my case, for these economic critiques resist labels. The recasting of capitalism as gangsterism is not simply intended to legitimate the illicit economy or de-legitimate capitalist exploitation. Gangsta rappers discuss capitalism in varying contexts, and to portray them as uniformly or consistently anticapitalist would certainly misrepresent them. All groups emphasize getting paid and, in real life, the more successful artists invest in their own production companies. They understand better than their audiences that music is a business and rapping is a job. At the same time, being paid for their work does



not mean they accept the current economic arrangements or think their music lacks integrity. On the contrary, for many black and Latino working-class youth who turned to hip hop music, rapping, deejaying, or producing is a means to avoid low-wage labor or, possibly, incarceration. As Cube said of his own crew, "You can either sell dope or get your ass a job/ I'd rather roll with the Lench Mob."[54]

Their ambivalence toward capitalism notwithstanding, gangsta rappers are consistent about tracing criminal behavior and vicious individualism to mainstream American culture. Contrary to the new "culture of poverty" theorists who claim that the lifestyles of the so-called black "underclass" constitute a significant deviation from mainstream values, most gangsta rappers insist that the characters they rap about epitomize what America has been and continues to be. In challenging the equation of criminality with some sort of "underclass" culture, Ice T retorts, "America stole from the Indians, sure and prove/What's that? A straight up nigga move!" Similarly, in "AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted," Ice Cube considers crime as American as apple pie: "It's the American way/ I'm a G-A-N-G-S-T-A." He even takes a swipe at the purest of American popular heroes, Superman. The man who stands for Truth, Justice, and the American Way is appropriated and then inverted as Public Enemy Number 1. From Ice Cube's perspective, Superman is a hero because the Americanism he represents is nothing but gangsterism. Donning the cape himself, Cube declares, "I'm not a rebel or a renegade on a quest, I'm a Nigga with an 'S'/So in case you get the kryptonite/I'm gonna rip tonight cause I'm scaring ya/ Wanted by America."[55]

These artists are even less ambiguous when applying the gangster metaphor to the people and institutions that control their lives—especially politicians, the state, and police departments. Ice T's "Street Killer," for example, is a brief monologue that sounds like the boasts of a heartless gangbanger but turns out to be a cop. In a recent interview, Coolio and W.C. of the MAAD Circle reverse the dominant discourse about criminals, insisting that the powerful, not powerless, ghetto dwellers, are the real gangsters:

> COOLIO: Who's the real gangsta, the brotha with the khakis on, the brotha with the Levis on or the muthafucka in the suit? Who's the real gangsta?

W.C.: Well, the suit is running the world, that's the real gangsta right there.[56]

Dozens of rap artists, both inside and outside L.A., indict "America" for stealing land, facilitating the drug trade either through inaction or active participation of the CIA and friendly dictators, and waging large-scale "drive-by shootings" against little countries such as Panama and Iraq. In the aftermath of the L.A. uprising, while politicians and media spokespersons called black participants "criminals" and "animals," Ice Cube reminded whoever would listen that, "The looting . . . in South-Central was nothing like the looting done by the savings and loans." Cube's video for "Who's the Mack," which reveals a photo of George Bush playing golf over the caption "President Mack" and a graffiti American flag with skull and crossbones replacing the stars, further underscored the argument that violence and gangsterism are best exemplified by the state, not young inner-city residents.[57]

Police repression remains gangsta rap's primary target. We must bear in mind that this subgenre was born amidst the militarization of Compton, Watts, and other black communities like Southgate, Carson, Northwest Pasadena, Paramount, and North Long Beach, which became the battlefields of the so-called "war on drugs" in L.A. The recasting of South Central as an American war zone was brought to us on NBC Nightly News, in Dan Rather's special report "48 Hours: On Gang Street," and in Hollywood films like *Colors* and *Boyz in the Hood*. *Straight Outta Compton*, for example, was released about the time Chief Darryl Gates implemented "Operation HAMMER," when almost 1,500 black youth in South Central were picked up for merely "looking suspicious." While most were charged with minor offenses like curfew and traffic violations, some were not charged at all but simply had their names and addresses logged in the LAPD antigang task force data base.[58] In this context NWA released their now classic anthem, "F——Tha Police." Opening with a mock trial in which NWA is the judge and jury and the police are the defendants, each member of the group offers his own testimony. After promising to tell "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," Ice Cube takes the stand and explodes with an indictment against racism, repression, and the common practice of criminalizing all black youth. NWA emphasizes the fact that police repression is no longer a simple matter of white racists with a badge, for black cops are just as bad, if not worse, than white cops.[59]



L.A. rappers have since expanded their critique of the relationship between police repression and their own political and economic powerlessness. Ice Cube's solo effort, NWA's most recent album, and groups like Compton's Most Wanted ("They Still Gafflin"), Cypress Hill ("Pigs" and "How I Could Just Kill a Man"), Kid Frost ("I Got Pulled Over" and "Penitentiary") to name but a few, try to place their descriptions of police repression within a broader context of social control.[60] "One Time's" or "Five-O's," as the police are called in L.A., are portrayed as part of a larger system of racist and class domination that includes black officers. For W.C. and the MAAD Circle, policing as a form of racial and class oppression is part of a longer historical tradition etched in the collective memory of African Americans. "Behind Closed Doors" begins with lead rapper W.C. writing a letter of complaint to the chief of police describing an incident in which he was beaten and subsequently shot by officers with no provocation. In just a few lines, W.C. links antebellum slavery and depression-era fascism to the more recent police beating of Rodney King.[61]

Mirroring much current political discourse in urban black America, some gangsta rappers implicitly or explicitly suggest that police repression is a genocidal war against black men.[62] "Real Niggaz Don't Die," which samples the Last Poets' live performance of "Die Nigger," and Ice Cube's "Endangered Species (Tales from the Darkside)" construct black males as the prey of vicious, racist police officers. Cube's lyrics underscore the point that the role of law enforcement is to protect the status quo and keep black folks in check:

Every cop killer goes ignored,
They just send another nigger to the morgue.
A point scored. They could give a fuck about us.
They'd rather catch us with guns and white powder.

They'll kill ten of me to get the job correct
To serve, protect, and break a nigga's neck[63]

In the title track of *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, in which Ice Cube assumes the role of an inner-city criminal who ventures into the sub-

urbs, he closes the song having learned a valuable lesson about community differences in policing: "I think back when I was robbing my own kind/The police didn't pay it no mind/But when I started robbing the white folks/Now I'm in the pen with the soap on the rope."

"Behind Closed Doors" by W.C. and the MAAD Circle speaks to the less dramatic incidents of police repression that frequently have greater resonance among black youth. In one of the stories, Circle rapper Coolio is a recently discharged ex-convict working hard to survive legitimately, until he is stopped and harassed for no apparent reason by "the same crooked cop from a long time ago/ Who planted an ounce in my homie's El Camino." He and the cop exchange blows, but instead of taking him into custody the officer and his partner decide to drop him off in hostile gang territory in order to incite violence. Coolio's narrative is more than plausible: among the tactics adopted by Chief Darryl Gates in his antigang sweeps was to draw out gang bangers by "leaving suspects on enemy turfs, writing over Crip graffiti with Blood colors (or vice versa) and spreading incendiary rumors."[64]

Even more common to the collective experience of young black residents of L.A.'s inner city was the police policy of identifying presumably suspicious characters on the basis of clothing styles. Indeed, officers who were part of the Gang Related Active Trafficker Suppression program were told to "interrogate anyone who they suspect is a gang member, basing their assumptions on their dress or their use of gang hand signals."[65] Opposition to this kind of marking, along the lines of a battle for the right to free expression and unfettered mobility in public spaces, has been a central subtheme in gangsta rap's discursive war of position against police repression. In CMW's cut "Still Gafflin," lead rapper M. C. Eiht complains that the police are "on my dick trying to jack me/ I guess because I sport a hat and the khakis." Perhaps the sharpest critique is W.C. and the MAAD Circle's "Dress Code." Directed at ordinary white citizens, club owners, as well as police officers, the Circle tell stories of being stereotyped as common criminals or gang bangers by complete strangers, all of whom presume that "If you dress like me, you gotta run with a crew." Clothing also signifies status, as is evident in the way W.C. is treated when he tries to get into a club: "Got a wear a silk shirt/ just to dance to a funky song." Nevertheless, he and his crew not only refuse to apologize for their appearance, insisting all along that young working-class black men have the right to dress as they please without being treated with fear or contempt, but W.C. also attributes his style to his class position. Because he "can't afford to shop at Macy's or Penney's . . . its off to the swap meet for a fresh pair of dicky's [khaki pants]."[66]



Of course, style politics are much more complicated. Even the most impoverished black youth do not choose styles solely on the basis of what is affordable. Young men wear the starter jackets, hoodies, L.A. Raiders caps, baggy khaki pants, and occasionally gold chains not only because they are in style, but because it enables them to create their own identity—one that defines them as rebels. While clothes are not intrinsically rebellious, young people give them what Dick Hebdige identifies as "'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination."[67] It is naive to believe, for example, that black youth merely sport Raiders paraphernalia because they are all hardcore fans. Besides, as soon as NWA and more recent L.A. groups came on the scene sporting Raiders caps, the style became even more directly associated with the gangsta rappers than with the team itself, and the police regarded the caps, beanies, hoods, and starter jackets as gang attire.

What we need always to keep in mind is the degree of self-consciousness with which black urban youth—most of whom neither are gang members nor engage in violent crime—insist on wearing the styles that tend to draw police attention. By associating certain black youth styles with criminality, violence, and (indirectly) police repression, the dominant media unintentionally popularize these styles among young men who reinterpret these images as acts of rebellion or outright racist terror.[68] The styles also suggest an implicit acceptance of an "outlaw" status that capitalist transformation and the militarization of black Los Angeles have brought about. Hence the adoption and recasting of "G" as a friendly form of address used by young African American men and, to a lesser degree, women. While the origins of "G" apparently go back to the Five-Percent Nation (a fairly unorthodox Black Muslim youth group) on the East Coast where it was an abbreviation for "God," among youth in California and elsewhere it currently stands for "gangsta."[69] Finally, my own discussions with black youth in L.A. reveal that the black and silver Los

Angeles Kings caps, associated with artists like King Tee, NWA, and other gangsta groups, have become even more popular following the King beating and the subsequent uprising—and hockey clearly has nothing to do with it. These caps signify very powerfully that all young African Americans are potential "L.A. [Rodney] Kings."[70]

In the streets of Los Angeles, as well as in other cities across the country, hip hop's challenge to police brutality sometimes moves beyond the discursive arena. Their music and expressive styles have literally become weapons in a battle over the right to occupy public space. Frequently employing high-decibel car stereos and boom boxes, black youth not only "pump up the volume" for their own listening pleasure, but also as part of an indirect, ad hoc war of position. The "noise" constitutes a form of cultural resistance that should not be ignored, especially when we add those resistive lyrics about destroying the state or retaliating against the police. Imagine a convertible Impala or a Suzuki pulling up alongside a "black and white," pumping the revenge fantasy segment of Ice Cube's "The Wrong Nigga to F——Wit" which promises to break Chief Darryl Gates's "spine like a jelly fish" or Cypress Hill vowing to turn "pigs" into "sausage."[71] Hip hop producers have increased the stakes by pioneering technologies that extend and "fatten" the bass in order to improve clarity at higher volume (appropriately called "jeep beats"). We cannot easily dismiss Ice Cube when he declares, "I'm the one with a trunk of funk/ and 'Fuck the Police' in the tape deck."[72]

For gangsta rappers, and black urban youth more generally, the police are a small part of an oppressive criminal justice system. The fact that, in 1989, 23 percent of black males ages twenty to twenty-nine were either behind bars or on legal probation or parole, has been a central political issue in the hip hop community. The combination of rising crime rates and longer sentencing has led to a rapid increase in the black prison population in the United States, and there is substantial evidence that racial bias is partly responsible; studies have shown, for example, that black men convicted of the same crime as whites receive longer sentences on average. The racial inequities were even more pronounced for juvenile offenders; during the last two decades, whereas most African American juveniles ended up in prisonlike public detention centers, white youths were more likely to end up in private institutions (halfway houses, shelters, group homes, etc.) that encouraged rehabilitation, skill development, and family interaction.[73]



With rising rates of incarceration for young black males, life behind bars has become a major theme in gangsta narratives. Through thick descriptions of prison life and samples of the actual voices of convicts (e.g., Ice T's "The Tower," W.C. and the MAAD Circle's "Out on a Furlough," and Kid Frost's "The Penitentiary") gangsta rappers come close to providing what Michel Foucault calls a "counter-discourse of prisoners." As Foucault explains, "when prisoners began to speak, they possessed an individual theory of prisons, the penal system, and justice. It is this form of discourse which ultimately matters, a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents—and not a theory *about* delinquency."[74] Most rappers—especially gangsta rappers—treat prisons as virtual fascist institutions. At the end of his *OG* album, Ice T suggests that prisons constitute a form of modern-day bondage. "They say slavery has been abolished except for the convicted felon." Moreover, mirroring the sentiments of a significant segment of the black community, several rappers suggest that the high incarceration rate of black males is part of a conspiracy. In "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate," Ice Cube asks aloud, "why [are] there more niggas in the pen than in college?"[75] He even suggests in "The Product" that prison is the inevitable outcome for young black men who fail or refuse to conform to the dominant culture. Inmates, he argues, are "products" of joblessness, police repression, and an inferior and racist educational system.[76]

Gangsta rappers tend toward a kind of "scared straight" approach to describing actual prison life. But unlike, say, the "Lifer's Group," their descriptions of prison are not intended merely to deter black youth from crime, for that would imply an acceptance of prisons as primarily institutions to punish and reform "criminals." Instead, their descriptions of prison life essentially reverse the popular image of black prisoners as "Willie Horton" and paint a richer portrait of inmates as real human beings trying to survive under inhuman conditions. While they do not ignore the physical and sexual violence[77] between prisoners, they do suggest that prison conditions are at the root of such behavior. Again, we return to "The Product":

Livin' in a concrete ho house,
Where all the products go, no doubt.
Yo, momma, I got to do eleven,
Livin' in a five by seven.
Dear babe, your man's gettin worn out
Seeing young boys gettin' their assholes torn out.

It's driving me batty,
Cause my little boy is missing daddy.
I'm ashamed but the fact is,
I wish pops let me off on the mattress [i.e., wishes he was never conceived.]
Or should I just hang from the top bunk?
But that's going out like a punk.
My life is fucked. But it ain't my fault
Cause I'm a motherfuckin' product.

Ice T's "The Tower" suggests that violence between inmates, especially racial conflict, is permitted if not instigated by guards and administrators as a means of controlling "the yard." The song consists of several first-person anecdotes rapped over a haunting synthesized cello track and punctuated by "audio verité" samples of presumably authentic prisoners telling their own stories of violence in the pen. By focusing on prison architecture rather than the inmates themselves, the video for "The Tower" emphasizes how the structural and spatial arrangements themselves reproduce the prisoners' powerlessness. After each verse, Ice T asks "who had the power?/ The whites, the blacks, or just the gun tower?"[78]

The criminalization, surveillance, incarceration, and immizeration of black youth in the postindustrial city have been the central theme in gangsta rap, and at the same time, sadly, constitute the primary experiences from which their identities are constructed. Whereas Afrocentric rappers build an imagined community by invoking images of ancient African civilizations, gangsta rappers are more prone to follow Eric B. and Rakim's dictum, "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at." When they are not describing prison or death, they describe daily life in the "ghetto"—an overcrowded world of deteriorating tenement apartments or tiny cement block, prisonlike "projects,"



streets filthy from the lack of city services, liquor stores and billboards selling malt liquor and cigarettes. The construction of the "ghetto" as a living nightmare and "gangstas" as products of that nightmare has given rise to what I call a new "Ghettocentric" identity in which the specific class, race, and gendered experiences in late capitalist urban centers coalesce to create a new identity—"Nigga."

## Niggas in Post–Civil Rights America

I'm a nigger, not a colored man or a black
or a Negro or an Afro-American—I'm all that
Yes, I was born in America too.
But does South Central look like America to you?
—ICE T, "Straight Up Nigga"[79]

Perhaps the most soulful word in the world is "nigger."
—CLAUDE BROWN, "The Language of Soul"[80]

Gangsta rappers have drawn a lot of fire for their persistent use of "Nigga." Even the *New York Times* and popular magazines like *Emerge* have entered the debate, carrying articles about the growing popularity of the "N" word among young people. Rap artists are accused of inculcating self-hatred and playing into white racism. Yet those who insist that the use of "Nigga" in rap demonstrates self-hatred and ignorance of African American history do not generally impose the same race-conscious litmus test to black folklore, oral histories, ordinary vernacular speech, or other cultural traditions where "nigger" is used as a neutral or even friendly appellation. In these latter circumstances, "nigger" was/is uttered and interpreted among black folk within a specific, clearly defined context, tone, and set of "codes" rooted in black vernacular language. As anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan explained, "the use of 'nigger' with other black English markers has the effect of 'smiling when you say that.' The use of standard English with 'nigger,' in the words of an informant, is 'the wrong tone of voice' and may be taken as abusive." Very few African Americans would point to such dialogues as examples of "self-hatred." This is what Ice Cube was trying to get at in an interview: "Look, when we call each other nigger it means no harm, in fact, in

Compton, it's a friendly word. But if a white person uses it, it's something different, it's a racist word."[81]

To comprehend the politics of Ghettocentricity, we must understand the myriad ways in which the most Ghettocentric segments of the West Coast hip hop community have employed the term "Nigga." Gangsta rappers, in particular, are struggling to ascribe new, potentially empowering meanings to the word. Indeed, the increasingly common practice of spelling it "N-i-g-g-a" suggests a revisioning. For example, Bay Area rapper and former Digital Underground member, 2Pac (Tupac Shakur), insists in his first album that Nigga stands for "Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accomplished."[82] More common, however, is the use of "Nigga" to describe a condition rather than skin color or culture. Above all, Nigga speaks to a collective identity shaped by class consciousness, the character of inner-city space, police repression, poverty, and the constant threat of intraracial violence. Part of NWA's "Niggaz4Life," for instance, uses "Nigga" almost as a synonym for oppressed.[83]

In other words, Nigga is not merely *another* word for black. Products of the postindustrial ghetto, the characters in gangsta rap constantly remind listeners that they are still second-class citizens—"Niggaz"—whose collective experiences suggest that nothing has changed *for them* as opposed to the black middle class. In fact, Nigga is frequently employed to distinguish urban black working-class males from the black bourgeoisie and African Americans in positions of institutional authority. Their point is simple: the experiences of young black men in the inner city are not universal to all black people, and, in fact, they recognize that some African Americans play a role in perpetuating their oppression. To be a "real nigga" is to be a product of the ghetto. By linking their identity to the "'hood" instead of simply skin color, gangsta rappers implicitly acknowledge the limitations of racial politics, including black middle-class reformism as well as black nationalism. Again, this is not new. "Nigger" as a signifier of class and race oppression has been a common part of black rural and working-class language throughout the twentieth century, if not longer. In fact, because of its power to distinguish the black urban poor from upwardly mobile middle-class blacks, "Nigger" made a huge comeback at the height of the Black Power movement. Robert DeCoy's infamous book, *The Nigger Bible*, published in 1967, distinguishes "Nigger" from "Negroes"—the latter a derogatory term for sellouts. DeCoy defined "Negro" as a "vulgar but accepted description of the Nigrite or Nigger. Referring to an American Nigger of decency and status. A White-Nigger. Or a brainwashed Black who would be Caucasian if possible . . ." And one Los Angeles–based black nationalist artist's collective, the Ashanti Art Service, launched a journal called *Nigger Uprising* in 1968.[84]



Perhaps not since the days of blues singer "Leadbelly" has the word "bourgeois" been so commonly used by black musicians. It has become common lingo among hip hop artists to refer to black-owned radio stations and, more generally, middle-class African Americans who exhibit disgust or indifference toward young, working-class blacks. For Ice T, living in the lap of luxury is not what renders the black bourgeoisie bankrupt, but rather their inability to understand the world of the ghetto, black youth culture, and rap music. In an interview a few years back he explained, "I don't think the negative propaganda about rap comes from the true black community—it comes from the bourgeois black community, which I hate. Those are the blacks who have an attitude that because I wear a hat and a gold chain, I'm a nigger and they're better than me." More recently, on his album *The Iceberg/Freedom of Speech . . . Just Watch What You Say*, he expressed similar sentiments: "I'm trying to save my community, but these bourgeois blacks keep on doggin' me. . . . You just a bunch of punk, bourgeois black suckers."[85] W.C. and the MAAD Circle level an even more sustained attack on those they call "bourgeois Negroes." Proclaiming that the Circle's sympathies lie with "poor folks in the slums," W.C. writes off suburban middle-class African Americans as turncoats and cowards.[86]

And to be fair, not only is there increasing intraracial class segregation with the suburbanization of the black middle class, but wealthy African Americans are often guilty of the kind of social labeling associated with white suburbanites and police. One need only visit predominantly black public spaces with considerable cross-class mixing (e.g., L.A.'s venerable Fox Hills Mall) to notice the considerable disdain many middle-class African Americans exhibit toward youth who are dressed a certain way or elect to walk in groups. Moreover, having come of age under a black mayor, black police officers, and a city council and legislature with a small but significant black presence,

L.A. gangsta rappers blame black politicians and authority figures as much as their white counterparts for the conditions that prevail in poor communities.[87]

L.A. gangsta rappers are frequent critics of black nationalists as well. They contend that the nationalists' focus on Africa—both past and present—obscures the daily battles poor black folk have to wage in contemporary America. In what proved to be a highly controversial statement, Eazy E declared: "Fuck that black power shit: we don't give a fuck. Free South Africa: we don't give a fuck. I bet there ain't nobody in South Africa wearing a button saying 'Free Compton' or 'Free California.'"[88] Ice Cube poses the same issue in "Endangered Species (Tales from the Darkside)," but in a less dismissive and more meaningful manner:

> You want to free Africa,
> I'll stare at ya'
> Cause we ain't got it too good in America.
> I can't fuck with 'em overseas
> My homeboy died over kee's [kilos of cocaine][89]

To say that gangsta rappers are *anti*nationalist overstates the case. Groups like CPO and, more recently, Ice Cube express some explicitly nationalist positions, though L.A. groups have shown less inclination than their East Coast counterparts to openly support the Nation of Islam or the Five-Percent Nation. West Coast gangsta groups tend to be more wary of nationalism given the real divisions that exist among African Americans, the Afrocentric celebration of a past which, to them, has no direct bearing on the present, and the hypocrisy and inconsistency exhibited by individual black nationalists. The last point is the subject of W.C. and the MAAD Circle's "Caught N' a Fad," wherein they tell the story of a hustler who joined the Nation and wore African garb because it was in style but never changed his ways. He was "popping that 'too black, too strong/ But he was the first to get the dice game going on." Likewise, in "The Nigga Ya Love to Hate" Ice Cube takes a swipe at the Afrocentrists who speak of returning to Africa: "All those motherfuckers who say they're too black/ Put 'em overseas, they be beggin' to come back."[90]

For all of its rebelliousness, Ghettocentricity, like Afrocentricity, draws its arsenal from the dominant ideology. As products of sustained violence, the characters in gangsta rap are constantly prepared to retaliate with violence, whether it's against a cop or another brother; those unwilling are considered "cowards," "punks," or as Ice T would say, "bitches." In other words, "real Niggaz" are not only victims of race and class domination but agents—dangerous agents, nightmarish caricatures of the worst of the dispossessed. What is most striking about gangsta rappers' construction of "Nigga" as the embodiment of violence is the extent to which this highly masculinist imagery draws from existing stereotypes. Once again, we find black youth subculture reconstructing dominant representations of who they are in order to "remake" their image in popular discourse.[91] Negative stereotypes of black men as violent, pathological, and lazy are recontextualized: criminal acts are turned into brilliant capers and a way to *avoid* work; white fears of black male violence become evidence of black power; fearlessness is treated as a measure of masculinity. A large part of Eazy E's repertoire has him proving his manhood and authenticity as a "real nigga" by bustin' caps on anyone who stands in his way.[92]



Following a long tradition of black humor, both Ice T and Eazy E appropriate and recast stereotypes of black men as hypersexual beings with large penises. Eazy explains that one of the reasons why he calls *himself* a "Nigga" is because he "can reach in my draws and pull out a bigger dick." Ice T, who refers to himself as a "White woman's dream/ Big dick straight up Nigger," combines several stereotypes in the following passage:

> I'm loud and proud,
> Well endowed with the big beef.
> Out on the corner,
> I hang out like a horse thief.
> So you can call me dumb or crazy,
> Ignorant, stupid, inferior, or lazy,
> Silly or foolish,
> But I'm badder and bigger,
> And most of all
> I'm a straight up Nigga.[93]

While the meanings of these appropriations and reversals of racial stereotypes constantly shift with different contexts, in many cases

they ultimately reinforce dominant images of African Americans. Moreover, the kinds of stereotypes they choose to appropriate—hypermasculinity, sexual power, and violence as a "natural" response—not only reproduce male domination over women, but often do so in an especially brutal manner.

## "Pimpin' Ain't Easy": Women in the Male Gangsta Imagination

> To me, all bitches are the same: money-hungry, scandalous, groupie hos that's always riding on a nigger's dick, always in a nigger's pocket.
>
> —Eazy E, "One Less Bitch"[94]

While young African American males are both products of and sometimes active participants in the creation of a new masculinist, antifeminist cultural current, we cannot be too quick to interpret sexist and misogynist lyrics as a peculiarly modern product. African American vernacular culture has a very long and ignoble tradition of sexism evidenced in daily language and other more formal variants such as "the dozens," "toasts," and the age-old "baaadman narratives." A word like "bitch," for example, was not suddenly imported into African American male vocabulary by rap music. In the late 1950s, it was such a common reference to women that folklorist Roger Abrahams, in his study of black oral culture in Philadelphia, added it to his glossary of terms as "Any woman. As used here, usually without usual pejorative connotations."[95] While his claim that the term was usually not pejorative is highly suspect, the pervasiveness of the term is clearly longstanding. Some of the toasts that are at least a few decades old are more venomous than much of what we find today in Hip Hop. In 1966, Bruce Jackson recorded a toast titled "The Lame and the Whore" in which a veteran pimp teaches a "weak" mack daddy how to treat his women:

> Say, you got to rule that bitch,
> you got to school that bitch,
> you got to teach her the Golden Rule,
> you got to stomp that bitch,
> you got to tromp that bitch,



> and use her like you would a tool.
> You got to drive that bitch
> and got to ride that bitch
> like you would a motherfucken mule.
>
> Then take the bitch out on the highway and drag her
> until she's damn near dead.
> Then take your pistol and shoot her
> right through her motherfucken head.[96]

Aside from narratives that have been recovered by historians and folklorists, I personally remember having learned by heart "Imp the Skimp, the Tennis Shoe Pimp," a long first-person narrative in which we bragged incessantly of being "the baby maker/ the booty taker." "Imp" became part of my verbal repertoire around 1971; I was nine years old. Unlike rap music, however, our sexist and misogynist street rhymes were never discussed on Ted Koppel's *Nightline* because they never made it to wax; they remained where our mamas said they should—in the streets.[97]

But the story is a bit more complicated than black youth recording and distributing an oral tradition of "hustler poetry." During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as America became an increasingly "sexualized society," we witnessed an explosion of recorded sexually explicit comedy routines by black comics like Rudy Ray Moore, Redd Foxx, and Richard Pryor, as well as the publication and popularization of so-called genuine "pimp narratives." The *Pimp*, not just any "baaadman," became an emblematic figure of the period, elevated to the status of hero and invoked by Hollywood as well as in the writings of black nationalist militants like H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton. Aside from film and popular literature, the Pimp appeared in a proliferation of sensationalist autobiographies, scholarly ethnographies, and "urban folklore" collections of incarcerated hustlers.[98]

Old school rappers like Ice T and Philly's Schooly D were strongly influenced by some of these published reminiscences of hustlers. Ice T recalls, "I used to read books by Iceberg Slim. . . . He would talk in rhyme—hustler-like stuff—and I would memorize lines." The classic recording of *Hustlers' Convention* in 1973 by an ex-prisoner who

would eventually help found the Last Poets, and the celebrated status of the pimp in blaxploitation films also had a profound impact on gangsta rap.[99] In fact, the word "gangsta" is frequently used interchangeably with terms like "Pimp," "Mack Daddy," "Daddy Mack," and "Hustler." One can hear the influence of the pimp narratives and black comedians on several Ice T cuts, especially "Somebody's Gotta Do It [Pimpin' Ain't Easy]," "I Love Ladies," and "Sex," which were recorded on his first album, *Rhyme Pays*. Boasting about his ability to please women sexually, the number of women he sleeps with, and the money he is making in the process, these kinds of rhymes are not descriptions of social reality but recorded versions of what anthropologist Ulf Hannerz calls "streetcorner mythmaking" or what hip hop critic Dan Charnas simply calls "bullshit, schoolboy humor."[100]

The critical question, it seems to me, is why has the pimp returned to an exalted status in black male popular culture in the 1990s? Or more broadly, why has the pimp figured so prominently in the late 1960s/early 1970s and the late 1980s/early 1990s, periods of rising black nationalism and male backlash? I have to believe that the celebration of the pimp in popular culture during the Black Power era is in part a response to the image of black female dominance created by the Moynihan report. Perhaps young black men identified with the pimp because he represented the ultimate dominator, turning matriarchy on its head. Perhaps the valorization of the pimp was just another example of black militants celebrating a "lumpen" lifestyle.

As for the present, the pimp may have made such a strong return via gangsta rap because the dominant discourse—from conservatives to African American nationalists—demands the restoration of the patriarchal family. But why do gangsta rappers (not unlike other male hip hop performers) exhibit a profound fear of black female sexuality, which manifests itself as open distrust or, in some cases, an aggressive hatred, of women?[101]

Given the central place that misogyny occupies in the gangsta/baaadman aesthetic, it would be hard to trust a straight sociological answer to this question. Furthermore, I do not believe rap music can or ever intended to represent the true and complex character of male/female relations among black urban youth. Too many critics have taken the easy way out by reading rap lyrics literally rather than developing a nuanced understanding of actual social relations among young people, in all of their diversity and complexity. And there is no reason in the world to believe that any music constitutes a mirror of social relations that can be generalized for entire groups of people.



Nevertheless, I do think that there is a specific social context that provides some insights into the *popularity* of gangsta rap and the particular forms its misogyny takes. For example, although the "traditional" family itself might be fading, neither the ideology of male dominance nor the kinds of economic negotiations that have always been a part of intrafamily conflict have disappeared. As is evident in both contemporary popular culture and current policy debates, the last decade or so has witnessed a reassertion of masculinity and the increasing commodification of sexual relations. Moreover, gangsta rappers, the mass media, and mainstream black leadership commonly cast the problems of the inner city as a problem of black males, even if their interpretations differ. Some intellectuals and politicians propose saving the "underclass" by eliminating welfare, retraining young black men in all-male schools, and reinstituting the nuclear family, implying, of course, that the cause of the current crisis lies not in economic decline but in the collapse of the male-headed family.[102]

But apparently it is not just men who are to blame: young working-class African American women are often portrayed as welfare queens making babies merely to stay on public assistance, or "gold diggers" who use their sexuality to take black men's meager earnings. Of course, this image is hardly new. But it has become an increasingly prominent theme in hip hop over the last ten years or so. In a "tongue-in-cheek" verbal duel with female rapper Yo Yo, Ice Cube offers some lyrics that are partly meant in jest but nonetheless reflect the thinking of many of his black male compatriots: "I hear females always talking 'bout women's lib/Then get your own crib, and stay there/Instead of having more babies for the welfare/Cause if you don't I'll label you a gold digger."[103]

Part of the attack has to do with what these rappers feel are overly high expectations of black men held by young black women. Thinking back to their pre-celebrity days when they were reportedly jobless or worked for minimum wages, a number of male rappers criticize women who wanted to go out only with men who were stable or fairly well-off financially. Given the lack of employment opportunities available to young black women, and the still dominant notion that

males ought to be the primary wage earners, these expectations could hardly be considered unreasonable. Yet, in interviews and in their music, most gangsta rappers label such women "bitches," "hos," or "skeezers." W.C. of the MAAD Circle, who is unique for avoiding these epithets on his debut album, tries to be slightly more conscientious by blaming "society" for inculcating women with materialistic values. Nevertheless, he throws up a weak argument for the use of the term "bitch": "Well, society has us all believing that if you don't fit up to their standard, then you're not shit. . . . If you have that attitude, then W.C. is calling you a bitch. But I'll never call a *woman* a bitch, because a real woman doesn't think with that mentality. This society has us believing that if you don't drive a brand new car, if you drive a bucket, you're not shit."[104]

While W.C. reveals one dimension of the pain poverty causes, his response is nonetheless a weak attempt to shift the issue. Distinguishing "bad" women from "good" women (or, in W.C.'s case, "real" women) still justifies violence against women by devaluing them, like most gangsta rap.[105] The most obvious examples can be found on NWA's recent album *Efil4zaggin*. Songs like "One Less Bitch" and the audio-verité recording "To Kill a Hooker" justify outright brutality and murder by using labels intended to strip women of any humanity. Hardly the stuff of everyday life in the ghetto, these draconian fantasy performances are more akin to "snuff films" than the kind of ethnographic observations NWA claim as their raw material. And like violent pornography, NWA's misogynist narratives are essentially about the degradation and complete domination of women. On the one hand, like the vast array of cultural images, they reinforce existing forms of patriarchal power; on the other hand, they construct male fantasy scenes of uncontested domination. They are never resisted or held accountable for acts of violence against women. In "One Less Bitch," Dr. Dre assumes the role of a pimp who discovers that his prostitute is trying to "steal" from him by retaining some of the money she earned. Reminiscent of "The Lame and the Whore" (or a "snuff film"—take your pick), Dre orchestrates what is best described as a lynching:

> I tied her to the bed, I was thinking the worst
> But, yo, I had to let my niggers fuck her first
> Yea, loaded up the .44
> Yo, then I straight smoked the ho.



Each story of mayhem and murder is broken up with a chorus of the entire NWA crew chanting: "One Less, one less, one less bitch you gotta worry about."

Economic conflict and a reassertion of male dominance in response to shifting gender and family relations still does not fully explain misogyny. Another part of the answer can be found in Tricia Rose's provocative and compelling argument that misogynist lyrics in rap reflect black male fears of black women's sexuality. Unlike male utopian spaces like "playboy clubs" where women are paid to be packaged fantasies, young inner-city black men have to deal with black women with real voices, demands, expectations, and complaints—women with agency. In the everyday lives of young black men, sexuality is always a process of negotiation. Rose suggests that "many men are hostile toward women because the fulfillment of male heterosexual desire is significantly checked by women's capacity for sexual rejection and/or manipulation of men." Manipulation, in this context, refers to the perceived power of black women to obtain money and goods in exchange for sex.[106]

Pregnancy is one way women allegedly extract attention and financial support, as is depicted in Ice Cube's "You Can't Fade Me." The narrative opens with Cube's character, who is on the corner drinking with his homies, discovering that he might have fathered a child by a young woman with whom he had a one-night stand. His initial impulse, not surprisingly, is to blame *her* rather than take responsibility. As the story progresses he recounts that one fateful night in stark, unflattering terms stripped completely of sensuality or pleasure. Because he saw her as physically unattractive he felt compelled to sneak around in order to have sex with her while preserving his reputation. When they finally found a safe place to have intercourse—in the backseat of his "homie's Impala"—both the sex and the end of their "date" were anticlimactic:

> I dropped her off man, and I'm knowing,
> That I'm a hate myself in the morning.
> I got drunk to help me forget,
> Another day, another hit, shit, I'm getting faded.

But once he returns to the present and she's about to have the child, the character Cube plays turns all of his anger and frustration upon her, threatening to beat her down and perform an abortion himself. In the end, the baby turns out not to be his, but the whole ordeal illustrates the possible consequences of his actions, even if the character Cube plays failed to learn anything from it. Sex as an act of conquest can also degrade men. Moreover, the end result of sexual conquest might be pregnancy, leading to the very thing the "playboy" ethic tries to avoid: commitment. In short, like all forms of power, male domination not only produces its own limits but it is constantly contested.

While songs like "You Can't Fade Me" are decidedly sexist, Ice Cube was among the first L.A. gangsta rappers to incorporate women's voices that contested his own lyrics. On *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, for example, we not only hear a young woman's voice disrupt "The Nigga You Love to Hate" with vehement protests over the use of the word "bitch," but Ice Cube invited Yo Yo, an extraordinary female rapper concerned with building a progressive movement of black women, to engage him in a verbal "battle of the sexes." "It's a Man's World" is the classic "dis" tune, a duet rooted in the "dozens" tradition and thus intended to be humorous. But it also reminds us that the discursive space in which young black men assert their masculinity and dominance over women is always highly contested terrain. After the song opens with literally dozens of sampled voices saying "bitch"—ranging from Richard Pryor, Eazy E, and controversial comedian Andrew "Dice" Clay—the machine-gunlike assault of sexist epithets closes with a lone male voice who responds, "don't talk about my mamma!" Ice Cube launches into what is ostensibly supposed to be monologue about what women are "good for," when suddenly Yo Yo seems to come out of nowhere and interrupts with, "What the hell you think you're talkin' about?" Because her initial intervention takes place away from the microphone in a sort of echo mode, her interruption is presented as an unexpected penetration into all-male space, reminding the "brothas" just how vulnerable "the circle" is to female invasion and disruption. From that point on, Yo Yo criticizes Cube's ability to rap, questions his manhood, and even makes fun of the size of his penis.[107]

Finally, I must caution against interpreting the misogyny in gangsta rap as merely a reflection of daily gender conflicts and negotiations among inner-city black youth. In many instances, their narratives are based on their lived experiences as *performers* whose status as cultural icons gives them an enormous amount of sexual power and freedom. The long version of Ice Cube's "Get Off My Dick Nigger—and Tell Yo' B—to Come Here," which is primarily an attack on male "groupies," simultaneously celebrates his new status and ridicules starstruck teenage women who ultimately become the prey of male performers. In a line that falls somewhere between masculinist boast and paternal warning, Cube tells these women "See for a fact, I do damage/ They think I'm a star, so I take advantage."[108] Several songs on NWA's *Efil4zaggin* assert both the newfound power the group holds over impressionable and sexually curious young female fans and the brutality that can result from such power. One of the more vicious segments in "She Swallowed It" is the story of a woman who "did the whole crew." As NWA tried to make the difficult shift from "street niggas" to fame and fortune, it became increasingly clear that they not only saw their newfound power as boundless but had no qualms about practicing what they "preach." Dr. Dre's assault on Dee Barnes, the host of the video show *Pump It Up* and member of the rap duo Body and Soul, is a case in point, as is Tupac Shakur's recent arrest for sexually assaulting a young woman whom he and his friends had imprisoned in a hotel room.[109]

Are there any potential cracks or ruptures in the gangsta rappers' constructions of women or in their efforts to reassert male power through violence and sexual domination? Occasionally there are, especially when rappers focus their attention on bad fathering and family violence. Indeed, Ice T's "The House" demands an end to violence against children within the family context, and W.C. and the MAAD Circle critiques domestic violence against women. The medium-tempo, hauntingly funky "Fuck My Daddy" shows the flip side of the world NWA raps about:

I'm giving peace to moms
Cause moms was the strongest.

Dad was a wino, as sick as a psycho.
I used to hide under the covers with my eyes closed.

Crying and hoping tonight that daddy didn't trip,
Cause mama already needs stitches in her top lip.

I used to pray and hope that daddy would die,
Cause over nothing mama suffered from a swole up
black eye.
And at the end of my prayers cry myself to sleep.
All I could think about was "Fuck my daddy."[110]

While W.C.'s lyrics mark a significant break from earlier gangsta groups, by focusing on his own mother as victim he does not directly challenge the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" women.[111] Moreover, neither of these examples challenges male domination, and reflections on lived experience alone are unlikely to convince most young men—gangsta rapper or not—that the overthrow of patriarchy should be part of an emancipatory agenda. However, the introduction of new *discourses* can play an important role in shaping the politics of rap music, and has. Not only have black women rappers played a crucial role in reshaping the attitudes toward women among a substantial segment of the hip hop community, they are also largely responsible for raising the issue of sexism within rap. Insofar as recording technology has conveyed the voices of ghetto youth (or those who claim the "authenticity" of ghetto living) to a national audience, it has brought rappers face-to-face with other critical communities, including feminists, left-wing radicals, suburban white youth, and Christian fundamentalists. The heated debates surrounding rap music have found their way into mainstream media where rap is generally either misunderstood or gangsta rap is regarded as real descriptions of daily life in the "ghetto." More significantly, the mass media attack on sexism in hip hop has obscured or ignored the degree to which rappers merely represent an extreme version of sexism that pervades daily life, across race and class. The devaluation of women goes on constantly, in television and film, in the labor market, in the courts, in educational and religious institutions, in suburban tract homes and gentrified high-class row houses, even in the way children are raised. Sexism is very much a part of "mainstream" American culture, and yet it is very difficult to generate a national dialogue about how pervasive it is in our society without eliciting diatribes about



"political correctness" or the hypersensitivity of females. The Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings are a case in point. The attacks on rap music also imply that misogyny is the unique property of young black males. While black male sexism should certainly not be ignored, the particular class and racial cast these criticisms take ultimately diverts attention from the general sexism in American culture. Hence, black youths' use of the term "bitch" gets more publicity than male bias on the bench in rape cases or gender discrimination in wages.

On the other hand, although the dialogue itself is limited, public discussions about rap's sexism have disrupted or challenged the narrow and localized assumptions of young black males. In other words, if rap had never become a commodity but remained forever in the streets and house parties of urban America, derogatory terms like "bitch" and misogyny within black communities would probably not have been so widely debated with such force. By turning what is frequently "street talk" into a national discussion that crosses gender, class, and racial boundaries, new discourses have the potential of at least challenging misogyny and possibly enabling black youth to perhaps see the limitations of the ideology of male dominance.

## afterWORD: A Genre Spent?

I don't like the trend toward so many gangster records in rap, but I am an art dealer and that's what is selling now.
—Russell Simmons, CEO of Rush Communications[112]

After the National Guard leaves, there's still gonna be angry, psycho motherfuckers out there.
—B-Real of Cypress Hill[113]

Who is Snoop Doggy Dogg? He's the latest superstar addition to Dr. Dre's stable on Deathrow Records, a gangsta rapper from Long Beach with the coolest, slickest "Calabama"[114] voice I've ever heard. You know his name because his recent arrest for the fatal shooting of a young black man became national news. While his picture never made the post office, Snoop's face graced the cover of *Newsweek* and almost every major music magazine, and gained notoriety on a variety of television news programs. That Snoop's murder charges coincided

with the release of his debut CD/album did not seem to hurt record sales one bit. On the contrary, the shooting simply confirmed his claims to be a "real" gangsta, to have committed more "dirt" than the next man. The hype around the man is clearly responsible for pushing *Doggy Style* to the top of the charts *before* it was released. Most of his lyrics represent nothing but senseless, banal nihilism. The misogyny is so dense that it sounds more like little kids discovering nasty words for the first time than some male pathos. It is pure profanity bereft of the rich storytelling and use of metaphor and simile that have been cornerstones of rap music since its origins.

Snoop Doggy Dogg is just the tip of the iceberg. Former NWA member Eazy E (aka Eric Wright) has either turned conservative or (more likely) found a new gimmick to sell records. Recently he donated money to the Republican Party and publicly defended one of the police officers accused of beating Rodney King. Not your typical gangsta posture. Furthermore, the current war between Dr. Dre and Eazy E has reduced gangsta rap to a battle over who has done the most dirt. According to Eazy, Dr. Dre and his new partners on Deathrow Records are just "studio gangstas" because they've committed little or no crimes.

While I still contend that most of the early gangsta rappers did not set out to glamorize crime, by the summer of 1993 gangsta rap had been reduced to "nihilism for nihilism's sake." For a moment, the hardest-core, most fantastic, misogynist, and nihilistic music outsold almost everything on the rap scene, burying the most politically correct. In some respects, this development should not be surprising. Hard-core gangsta rap has become so formulaic that capturing even a modicum of reality no longer seems to be a priority. Ironically, the massive popularity of gangsta rap coincided with a fairly substantial increase in white suburban consumers of rap. This is in spite of the post–L.A. rebellion political climate, when many commentators and cultural critics had hopes for a progressive turn in Ghettocentric music, and a militant backlash against gangsta rap specifically, and hip hop more generally (led mainly by middle-class male spokespersons like the Reverend Calvin Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, African American feminist groups, and some black working-class communities concerned about violence in their midst). And, as I pointed out elsewhere in this chapter, some of the most vociferous critics of gangsta rap come from within the hip hop community itself.[115]



As I close this chapter, with just two weeks left in 1993, one cannot help but notice how rap music generally, and gangsta rap in particular, has become the scapegoat for some very serious problems facing urban America. Besieged communities who are truly drowning in poverty and violence, it seems, are reaching out for a straw. Spokespersons for these antirap movements invoke a mythic past in which middle-class values supposedly ruled. They point to a "golden age" of good behavior, when the young respected their elders, worked hard, did not live their lives for leisure, took education seriously, and respected their neighbor's property. But this has been the claim of every generation of black intellectuals and self-appointed leaders since the end of Reconstruction (see chapter 2). The critique of the middle class that was so powerful in some glimmers of early gangsta rap is now silenced, as is the critique of what the economy has done to people. The door is open, more so than ever, for more all-male schools, heavier discipline, more policing, censorship, dress codes—what amounts to an all-out war on African American youth. On the other hand, the money is still flowing for gangsta rappers, many of whom now live in the hills overlooking the ghetto. The tragedy of all this is that the gangsta rappers have gotten harder and harder, kicking more ballistics than "reality"; critics and opponents have become harder and more sweeping in their criticism, dismissing not only the gangsta stuff but the entire body of rap; and the very conditions they are concerned about remain the same.

Gangsta rap might be on its last legs, a completely spent genre that now exists in a cul-de-sac of posturing, adolescent misogyny and blood-and-guts narratives. But it would be a mistake to dismiss gangsta rap and other genres of hip hop as useless creations of the marketplace. If we want to know the political climate among urban youth, we should still listen to the music and, most importantly, to the young people who fill the deadened, congested spaces of the city with these sonic forces. And as we all probably realize, the world from which this music emerged, and to which it partially speaks, inevitably faces the further deterioration of already unlivable neighborhoods, more street crime, and increased police repression. To take their voices seriously, however, is not to suggest that they are pro-

gressive or correct, or that every word, gesture, or beat is dripping with social significance. More often than not, "G-boys" are simply out to get paid, making funky jeep music, practicing the ancient art of playing the dozens, trying to be funny, and giving the people what they want. And when they are addressing the problems of inner-city communities we have to keep in mind that their sharpest critiques of capitalist America are derived from the same social and economic contexts that led a lot of homies to distrust black women and each other. Nevertheless, if we learned anything from that fateful night of April 29, it is that, whether we like the message or not, we must read the graffiti on the walls and, as Ice T puts it, "check the pulse of the rhyme flow."

## Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics (The "Race Rebel" Remix Version)

*. . . A nice, neat ending to be sure, but I can't go out like that. To write about the "politics" of gangsta rap is only part of the story. Let's face it: listening to gangsta rap, or any hardcore hip hop, is not exactly like reading an alternative version of* the *Times (New York or L.A.). Hip hop is first and foremost music, "noize" produced and purchased to drive to, rock to, chill to, drink to, and occasionally dance to. To the hardcore, how many people get fucked up in a song is less important than an MC's verbal facility on the mic, the creative and often hilarious use of puns, metaphors, similes, not to mention the ability to kick some serious slang and some serious ass on the microphone. A dope MC leaves a trail of victims to rot in body bags, perpetrators who had the audacity to front like they could flow. This is why I insisted from the get-go that gangsterism is integral to all hardcore hip hop, from EPMD to MC Lyte, from Big Daddy Kane to Nice n' Smooth, just as gangstas have been integral to all African American and, for that matter, black Atlantic oral traditions. Moreover, as microphone fiend Rakim might put it, hip hop ain't hip hop if you can't "move the crowd." In my book, the most politically correct rapper will never get my hard-earned duckets if they ain't kickin' some boomin' drum tracks, a phat bass line, a few well-placed JB-style guitar riffs, and some stupid, nasty turntable action. If it claims to be hip hop, it has to have, as Pete Rock says, "the breaks . . . the funky breaks . . . the funky breaks."*

*I wrote this little refrain not to contradict my analysis but to go out with a dose of reality while giving a shout out to the hardcore. For all the implicit and explicit politics of rap lyrics, hip hop must be understood as a sonic force more than anything else. You simply can't just read about it; it has to be heard, volume pumping, bass in full effect, index finger in reach of the rewind button when a compelling sample, break beat, or lyric catches your attention. This is why, for all my left-wing politics, when you see me driving by in my Subaru wagon, windows wide open, digging in the seams with the gangsta lean, rearview mirror trembling from the sonic forces, I'll probably be rockin' to the likes of King Tee, Dr. Dre, Pete Rock and C. L. Smooth, Das EFX, The Pharcyde, Cypress Hill, Boss, Lords of the Underground, MC Lyte, Ice T, The Coup, Jeru da Damaja, Son of Bazerk, Gangstarr, and, yes, Ice Cube. Keep the crossover and save the "PC" morality rap for those who act like they* don't *know. I'm still rollin' with Da Lench Mob, kickin' it with the Rhyme Syndicate, hanging out in the Basement with Pete Rock and the rest, and, like Das EFX, I'm coming straight from the Sewer . . .*

*I'm out. . . . Peace.*