Gimme Gimme Gunshots

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Gimme Gimme Gunshots:

Reflections on the Role of Violence in Rap Music

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To my grandfather, who struggled beautifully.

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Abstract

Violence in contemporary culture has provoked much discussion in recent years. Using rap music as an example, I investigate how violence functions within this music, and come to the conclusion that rap's violence exists within the African-American tradition of Signifyin(g), which foregrounds the rhetorical usage of language rather than the semantic meaning, and the postmodern aesthetic of appropriating old art for new purposes. Although these facts in themselves do not make rap violence innocent or remove any of the darker meanings from the often vulgar descriptions of violence in rap, these critical assessments focus on less-explored aspects of rap's violence, shifting the focus to something like a "poetics" of rap violence. One of the key elements of this "poetics" is that rap is by nature a contradictory genre, embracing lifestyles from all walks of life. Thus, in many ways, homogenizing arguments fail it. Only an astute and open-minded reader can successfully deal with this multivalent art. Each of my three main chapters has a distinct focus that helps in constructing my argument of the multiple interpretations of rap violence and the necessity for flexible readings. The first chapter makes a link (although not a simplistic, direct one) between social factors such as increasing unemployment, socioeconomic stratification, and the failings of a capitalist economy and the violence portrayed in early rap music. The second chapter discusses common interpretations of rap music and suggests some possible alternatives—not just for the sake of finding new perspectives, but also because the atmosphere around rap violence has changed, and new readings must be developed to keep up with the pace of the art. Finally, in the third chapter, I incorporate the social, economic, and political impact of 9/11 with current trends in rap music, and motion toward an interpretation of the music as a reading of society as whole.

CONTENTS

Short Titles

(BN): Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.* Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

(U): Harvey, David. *The Urban Experience.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1989.

(TSM): Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Figures

"We are in a position where we either transform or die."

- Kwame Kilpatrick, Mayor of Detroit, 3/14/06

A GLIMPSE AT THE STRUGGLE:

AN INTRODUCTION

I'm more necessary than violence on the Amistad
    "Hater's Anthem," Jean Grae

Please son, our thesis, will rip your crew to pieces . . .
I love the power of words, nouns and verbs
The pen and the sword: linguistic 'Art of War'
    "Quality Control," Jurassic 5

On June 11, 1993, an elderly woman rebuked a troubled young man for his profane language as he walked past her. The boy, who had been singing Dr. Dre's "Stranded on Death Row," took offense to this criticism, as well as to remarks about his socioeconomic status, and responded by beating the woman to death. He returned to the scene of the crime the next day in order to seek help for the woman, whom he presumed alive, but upon finding her dead, he spray painted her body in an attempt to hide his fingerprints, and then tried to immolate the body. He was subsequently arrested and found guilty of murder, despite his lawyer's best efforts to depict the young man, who had been recently released from a mental health center, as a victim of side effects brought on by his depression medication. On appeal, the decision was overturned.

In 1997, there convened a hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia on the topic of "Music Violence: How Does It Affect Our Children," at which various members of the government, the music industry, and the general population appeared to present their viewpoints on violence in music. Among the attendees was Mr. Raymond Kuntz, whose

son committed suicide while listening to shock rocker Marilyn Manson. The father, clearly distraught at this horrible loss, lamented his son's interest in this music. Senators and those in the music industry alike expressed their sympathy and promised to fight, respectively, for more stringent legislation on commercial music and for freedom of speech, that long-sacred Constitutional right.

In 1999, two young men acted out one of the most horrendous tragedies in our nation's history when they killed a dozen of their classmates and one teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The list of people and things assigned blame is long and ponderous. It includes Marilyn Manson (again), violence on television, violence in video games, uninvolved parents, and social hierarchies of American suburban high schools. Perhaps most befuddling is the link that Michael Moore attempts to establish between Lockheed Martin, Inc., whose corporate headquarters is in Littleton, and the violence acted out at the nearby high school. Surely not everyone in Ann Arbor is college-educated, nor do I feel the long, medicating shadow of Pfizer every time I venture outside.

In each of these tragic situations, there are constants: youth, rebellion, and music, among others. They are also marked by onlookers' eagerness to blame outside influences for the unfortunate events. If one were to believe everything one heard about Marilyn Manson and his enormous influence in the weeks following Columbine, it would be easy to wonder why such tragedies weren't occurring all over the country.[1]

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[1] In fact, rapper Eminem has repeatedly satirized the popular media's propensity to exaggerate the influence of commercial artists. At one awards show, he recruited over one hundred individuals who looked like him, outfitted them in matching white tee shirts and jeans, and marched them onstage while he performed his hit "The Real Slim Shady." (Slim Shady is one of the artist's aliases.) In his song "White America," Eminem too preys upon the public's fear of his exceptional influence when he sings, "White America, I could be one of your kids / Little Eric looks just like this / Erika loves my shit / Go on [MTV's video request program] TRL, look how many hugs I get!"

In 1996 and 1997, two of rap music's greatest artists, Tupac Shakur and Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, were murdered, six months apart. This collision of actual violence with the world of hip-hop[2], which had long been criticized as an exceptionally violent environment, effectively ended the age of "gangsta rap," a subgenre of rap that glamorized the "gangsta" lifestyle. This lifestyle had come to be synonymous with gun violence, misogyny, excessive consumption of various kinds of recreational drugs, promiscuity, materialism, disdain for authority, and machismo. In short, the mainstream media was glad to be rid of it, even as it ridiculed the genre for seemingly bringing this kind of senseless violence upon itself, as though hip-hop culture were merely the wretched victim of a Shakespearean tragedy. Rapper Eminem has described himself as "a regular modern-day Shakespeare," but I doubt he means to extend the Bard comparisons to those proportions ("Renegade," Jay-Z featuring Eminem).

In this essay, I hope to examine this violence from a critical perspective, questioning this formulation of rap's violence as an inherently irredeemable characteristic. I will present rap as postmodern art, which surely means different things to different people. In my view, rap embodies the postmodern aesthetics of innovative technology use, new appropriations of existing art, and the instant commoditization of art. I will respond to critics who are "forgettin' that the struggle's not over," as Murs raps ("Intro," Murs). As the music evolves, so should responses to it. Other art criticism develops new readings regularly; rap is comparatively stagnant, and I hope to present some new ways of reading. On the other hand, I will make very little effort to defend rap

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[2] Throughout this essay, I will attempt to differentiate between "rap" and "hip hop" in what has become somewhat of a cultural standard. "Hip hop" is the culture that surrounds this field; it includes the various arts of break dancing, graffiti writing (also known as "bombing"), and rapping. "Rap" is then the music that is produced out of this culture.

from the perspective that the music is "a high school phase," as one of my peers put it. The merit of the music, in my opinion, is non-negotiable.

In line, however, with this concept of a high school phase, let me situate my broad thesis in that old standby, the three-point thesis statement: the violence in rap music exists inherently within a musical form that is unavoidably influenced by the wretched conditions in which its originators lived; is literally as well as symbolically or metaphorically situated around three bodies—the social body, the body politic, and the individual physical body; and recently, if not earlier, has become a positive and creative force for reflection on social and political topics.

THE BEAUTIFUL STRUGGLE:

SPATIAL ARCHITECTONICS OF HIP-HOP

What more can I say? I wouldn't be here today
If the old school didn't pave the way.
      "Dedication," Brand Nubian

Every night you hear the bullets blast, even if you in the suburbs
Every night you see the footage flash across your screen
I'll tell you my biggest pet peeve: you looking at it thinking like, 'It don't affect me'
      "Axis," One Be Lo

Rap's direct engagement with politics—and concurrently, violence—can be tracked back to a 1982 record from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five called "The Message." Its chorus is one of the most famous of the genre:

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge

I'm tryin' not to lose my head

It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder

How I keep from goin' under ("The Message," Grandmaster Flash & The Furious

Five)

The rest of the song describes the squalid conditions of the Bronx in the late 1970s, from "broken glass everywhere" to "people pissin' on the stage." This song marked a huge step in rap music's development. At the time "The Message" was produced, rap's biggest hit was 1979's "Rapper's Delight," by the Sugarhill Gang. The Sugarhill Gang was a group thrown together by producer Sylvia Robinson, who was eager to craft a hit for her fledgling record label, Sugarhill Records (cf. Fricke & Ahearn, 181-2). Indeed, "Rapper's Delight" had all the makings of commercial success: it sampled Chic's pop hit, "Good Times;" its subject matter was banal, unthreatening, and often hilarious; and, as

one of the earliest rap records, it filled a commercial void for fans of the burgeoning genre.[1] To those fans, too, much of the song would have been familiar, for many of the lyrics were unapologetically stolen from other artists, especially Grandmaster Caz (Fricke & Ahearn, 188). Unfortunately for them, those artists didn't have record deals or any other legally recognized claims to these lyrics.

There's no denying that "Rapper's Delight" is a catchy song, and its foremost concern with popular appeal should not be taken as evidence for a lack of social engagement. But "The Message" moved beyond borrowed rhymes to more explicitly argue for change. The song's verses all capture different disturbing elements of post-industrial urban life. Connecting the various tales is a sense of hopelessness as events out of one's control seemingly conspire to frustrate all attempts at self-improvement.

As with nearly everything else in hip-hop culture, this sentiment has its roots in 1970s New York City. In her groundbreaking study of hip-hop culture, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose examines some of the factors that led New York into its bleak late-1970s conditions. She writes, "In the 1970s, cities across the country were gradually losing federal funding for social services, information service corporations were beginning to replace industrial factories, and corporate developers were buying up real estate to be converted into luxury housing, leaving working-class residents with limited affordable housing, a shrinking job market and diminishing social services. The poorest neighborhoods and the least powerful groups were the least protected and had the smallest safety nets" (*BN*, 27). Thus, already existing disparities in what has been called a "dual city" were exacerbated by public policy (Mollenkopf & Castells, 3). This decline

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[1] At least, "burgeoning" in the public's perception. Hip-hop promoter Art Armstrong has called the moment that rap music was recorded "the beginning of the end" for the genre (Fricke & Ahearn, 195).

in federal funding eventually forced New York City to request a "federal bail out" to stave off bankruptcy (*BN*, 28). This request was vetoed by President Ford, prompting the New York Daily News' famous headline, "Ford to New York: Drop Dead" (*BN*, 28). New York State and New York City were able to negotiate a loan, but repaying it meant cutting many social services from the city's budget. An uneven distribution of wealth continued well into the 1980s, with the bottom 20 percent of the population experiencing a decline in wealth while the top 20 percent reaped most of the benefits of any economic growth. At the same time, 25 percent of New York's black households and 30 percent of its Hispanic households lived at or below the poverty line (*BN*, 28).

Conditions were perhaps worst in the South Bronx. In 1975 alone, "there were 13,000 fires in a twelve-square-mile radius that left more than 10,000 people homeless and earned landlords $10 million in insurance settlements" (Fricke & Ahearn, viii). In 1977, President Jimmy Carter visited the area, which the New York Times called "as crucial to an understanding of American urban life as Auschwitz is crucial to an understanding of Nazism" ("The Trip to The Bronx"). In 1980, Ronald Reagan visited and compared the South Bronx to London after the Battle of Britain.

From these desolate conditions sprang hip-hop. From the onset, this culture has existed primarily as a reaction and response to various hardships and socioeconomic disparities. Implicit in the title of Murray Forman's extensive *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* are the ideas that "the 'hood" (short for "neighborhood") is the most important *place* in the formation of one's hip-hop identity—the physical location one represents to those defined as "other" and, more important, that the 'hood as a *space* embodies the primary impetus of hip-hop's emergence. The very

first of these 'hoods, the Eden of rap, is the South Bronx. That phrase, "the Eden of rap," may be read somewhat ironically, for, as we have seen, the South Bronx of the 1970s bore little resemblance to a Biblical Eden. Yet if Eden was the perfect setting for the Creation myth, then the South Bronx of the 1970s was just as necessary for another conception tale.

And if the South Bronx is Eden, then rap's Adam is DJ Kool Herc. Herc was a Jamaican immigrant who brought with him huge speakers (nicknamed the Herculoids) and the idea of extending instrumental dance breaks, known as "break beats," for substantial amounts of time (*BN*, 51). While these beats might normally last just a few measures in a standard pop or disco song, Herc would use his sound system to make them last for minutes on end, thus sampling arguably the catchiest, albeit briefest, part of the song and giving it the spotlight. This practice also extended to songs beyond the immediately recognizable disco tracks. In fact, once other DJs (disc jockeys) learned this technique, there arose a kind of competition to see who could find the most obscure beat and turn it into the best song for dancing. In hip-hop culture, this most often meant break dancing. Soon after all this came the innovation of having someone speak over these extended breaks, and rapping was born. The first raps were usually nothing more than spoken praises of the DJ's ability to manipulate records on his turntables (called "scratching"). This practice of verbal praising is reminiscent of various African-American oral traditions, including toasting.[2] It is also worth mentioning that the stars of rap in these early days were the DJs—the ones creating the sounds—and not the MCs

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[2] While rapping is often characterized as an extension of African-American oral traditions, Tricia Rose warns us that we must be cautious in embracing this perspective, especially because this perspective a) marginalizes the role of the music in rap, b) suggests that rap developed "autonomously" outside of hip-hop culture rather than as an essential product of this culture, and c) ignores the effects of the post-industrial city on rap's development (*BN*, 25).

("master of ceremonies" or "mic controller"), also known as rappers. This eventually changed once MCs developed greater repertoires and became more adept at what they did. Now, rappers are the bigger stars, although certain producers have a good deal of celebrity, including Kanye West (who also raps), Just Blaze, and DJ Green Lantern.

Before moving on, and if I may extend the Eden metaphor a bit more, let me say a few words about the Eve of rap. There is, coincidentally, a rapper named Eve, but she is not entirely relevant to this discussion. Naming one "Eve" as a female progenitor of rap is a difficult and potentially unproductive task because the literature de-emphasizes any role women might have had in its creation, the popular press depicts rap as an inherently misogynistic genre, and very few female rappers have achieved the prominence of their male counterparts. Some exceptions include the aforementioned Eve, MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Jean Grae, Salt and Pepa, Sister Souljah, Missy Elliott, Lil' Kim, and Roxanne Shante. At least one critic, Tricia Rose, is especially concerned with gender issues in rap music. She contends that "black women rappers interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the margins of public discourse" (*BN*, 146). From this perspective, female rappers are incredibly important to rap's presence, and may even be seen as a more intense microcosm of the overall purpose of rap in general. After all, what is rap but a sound from "the margins of public discourse"? Rapper Ms. Melodie adds this to the conversation about the role of women in rap's early days: "It wasn't that the male started rap, the male was just the first to be put on wax [recorded]. Females were always into rap, and females always had their little crews and were always known for rockin' house parties and streets or whatever, school yards, the corner, the park, whatever it was" (qtd.

in *BN*, 154). Finding one "Eve" may be impossible, but this testimony and Rose's criticism support the hypothesis that women were involved in rap music from the very start.

Although Gil Scott-Heron's spoken word performance "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," often considered a precursor to rap, alludes to the failure and unimportance of technology in an age of revolution, rap music clearly contradicts this notion.[3] Technology has always been instrumental (no pun intended) in the development of rap. Turntables, speakers, microphones, sampling equipment, and now, computers, have played a pivotal role in the fundamental music production process of rap, which is characterized by repossession and re-appropriation of existing texts and sounds, layering of multiple sounds to create a sonic collage, and various rupturing techniques, both in the vocal performance of the rapper and in the underlying sounds. These sonic ruptures are often created by layering multiple short samples on top of one another with variable lengths and staggering these samples so they often end at different moments. In a more physical sense, the technology of rap was in many ways influenced by the socioeconomic statuses of the communities from which it came. Turntables were much easier to purchase than were grand pianos, for example.

Based on the aforementioned descriptions of the South Bronx, it is difficult to doubt the authenticity of "The Message".[4] These two compatible messages have the combined effect of further solidifying outsiders' views on the South Bronx by bolstering

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[3] Having said that, one must admit that in this age of the Internet, in which mass protests are organized via cellular phones, the revolution very likely *will* be televised. Still, rap has mostly remained true to its revolutionary spirit while simultaneously managing to remain popular, so it flows nicely with this flexible idea of revolution. Also notable here is Chuck D's opinion that rap is the "black CNN." (cf. Chuck D).
[4] Authenticity is an integral part of rap music that is beyond the scope of this essay. For further reading, see Armstrong.

some commonly held opinions and providing no antithetical arguments (i.e. there is no verse in "The Message" about the considerable aesthetic pleasure derived from dilapidated housing projects). This process has the additional effect of placing a certain degree of worth on this area. As Forman puts it, "It is in and through language that the values of places are produced. For example, localities under duress (from, for instance, a major local fire, an outbreak of crime and violence, intense devastation, or conditions of extreme hardship) commonly gravitate toward the themes and discursive articulations of 'the community' with little effort or forethought" (30). These "communities" need to be examined more thoroughly, so let us take a moment to do so. It may seem overly simplistic to group many diverse identities into such rigid boundaries as "the South Bronx" or "hip-hop." Yet, as Lefebvre says, "(Social) space is a (social) product" (qtd. in Forman, 4). This may be interpreted to mean that all individual members of a community have a hand in creating that group's identity. From that same viewpoint, group identity is dependent upon the group's production. This output can be thought of in terms of a collective group identity, as stated above; however, this principle can also be observed in studies on the effects of capital on spatial dynamics. This theory aligns itself well with the living conditions in New York City in the 1970s. The budget cuts that followed the decline in federal funding to the city significantly altered the shape of the city's workforce. New York City shifted from a manufacturing-intensive, mostly blue-collar urban center to an economically, socially, and racially stratified metropolis, as a result of tremendous immigration (especially from the Caribbean) and an overall transformation in the fundamental structure of the city's economy.

There are at least two ways to approach this transformation. Daniel Bell, in his original articulation of "post-industrial society," emphasizes control of knowledge, or "intellectual technology," as an important measure of power in such a society. "The post-industrial society . . . is a knowledge society in a double sense: first, the sources of innovation are increasingly derivative from research and development . . .; second, the weight of the society . . . is increasingly in the knowledge field," he writes (Bell, 212). "But," he is quick to point out, "such emphasis does not mean that technology is the primary determinant of all other societal changes . . . Some critics have argued that post-industrial society will not 'succeed' capitalism. But this sets up a false confrontation between two *different* conceptual schemata organized along two different axes. The post-industrial schema refers to the socio-technical dimension of a society, capitalism to the socio-economic dimension" (Bell, x, author's italics). Thus, while knowledge is clearly very important, it does not rule all in Bell's post-industrial society. So for now, let us consider the "socio-technical" and "socio-economic" dimensions of post-industrial society.

Variance along the socio-technical axis is most directly correlated with variance in knowledge. With regards to labor practices, this disparity has the effect of further segregating rich from poor. In labor theory such as that practiced by Marx, "intelligence (knowledge, science, technique) is objectified in the machine, thus separating manual from mental labour and diminishing the application of intelligence on the part of the direct producers. In all of these respects, the individual labourer is 'made poor' in individual productive powers 'in order to make the collective labourer, and through him capital rich in social productive power' (Harvey, *Postmodernism*, 105; Marx, qtd. in

Harvey, *Postmodernism*, 105). Here the individual suffers for the betterment of the collective. In postmodern society, this is not the case (cf. Harvey, *Postmodernism*, 340-1 for some typical characteristics of postmodern society).[5] Rather, collective control of knowledge has become indicative of power (cf. Bell, xiv).[6] Michel Foucault is especially concerned with this relationship. He even goes so far as to say that "Power produces [knowledge]" and that "power and knowledge directly imply one another" (*Power/Knowledge*, 59; *Discipline and Punish*, 27). I do not dispute that power produces knowledge, but I would also add that the relationship flows both ways, with knowledge also producing power, as Foucault's remark that they "directly imply one another" implies. In this way, a cycle of power/knowledge is created and utilized to oppress those without power/knowledge, limiting their access to means of acquiring these pivotal tools. Speaking of power over the body, Foucault writes, "In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it *invests* them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them" (*Discipline and Punish*, 26-7, emphasis added).[7] It is appropriate that this quote comes from a study of

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[5] For a commentary on the meaning of "postmodern," see Costello & Foster Wallace, 84n.
[6] In all of this talk of collective group identity and the effects of individuals on groups, it can be easy to forget that all groups are heterogeneous in character, and as such, do not act of one accord in all circumstances. It is obviously less complicated to speak of groups as though they are one individual, but this should not be taken to mean that they *really* are, of course.
[7] Even in speaking of power and knowledge, it is difficult to escape the language of capitalism, as Foucault's use of "invests" indicates. The axes of post-industrial society that Bell laid out are often very much related to one another. Also, in another vein, we must remind ourselves that this "struggle" that Foucault describes is always a "beautiful struggle," to borrow a line from rapper Talib Kweli. Kweli's

prisons, for many rappers are fond of comparing their hometowns to places of forced confinement. Notable among these is the Dayton Family, a group named after Dayton Avenue, a notoriously dangerous neighborhood in Flint, Michigan. The group's biggest hit, 1995's "Flint Town," vividly depicts the hardships of growing up in Flint—a town decimated by unemployment in the wake of the auto industry's decline throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

> Michael Jackson said it don't matter, "Black or White," well it should
>
> Cause Flint, Michigan's a long way from Hollywood
>
> I tried to go to college but I saw myself stuck in Flint
>
> Besides them college folks didn't want no poor male black resident
>
> Flint, Michigan's a prison and we all are locked up
>
> The only good jobs are the jobs that could be rocked up ("Flint Town," Dayton
>
> Family)

This excerpt is obviously very concerned with issues of space and place. The rapper, Ira Dorsey (a.k.a. "Bootleg"), mentions Flint three times in four lines, and contrasts Flint as a "prison" with bourgeois images of college and Hollywood, in both instances implying a racially- and socioeconomically-motivated system that functions differently in Flint than in those other locations. In fact, a later lyric states "My city's being fucked by your system, that's evident." The attention to labor is also telling, since Flint has had one of the nation's highest unemployment rates since the early 1980s. Bootleg clearly sees college as an opportunity to improve one's career prospects and escape the hardships of Flint, but perceives bias in "college folks" working against him. Furthermore, the best

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album *The Beautiful Struggle* features a track called "I Try," in which Kweli states that "Life is a beautiful struggle."

jobs in Flint are "the jobs that could be rocked up," a reference to drug trafficking (crack cocaine is often referred to as "rocks"). He goes on to denounce jobs in the food service industry as undesirable because those employees "still be livin' poor;" that is, the jobs don't provide enough income on which to live, with the implication that such jobs also rob one of one's remaining dignity. In a situation where one's self-worth is already under attack, this becomes quite a valuable commodity.

Of course, those lyrics speak not only to the socio-technical aspects of post-industrial society (e.g., college as purveyor of knowledge) but also to its socio-economic aspects (e.g., the discussion of jobs). For further discussion of these socio-economic conditions as they pertain to cities, let us turn to David Harvey, who writes, "Capital accumulation and the production of urbanization go hand in hand" (*U*, 22). Cities intensify the potential for capital accumulation and manipulate the dimensions of space and time to minimize interference with this goal. In a way, this destroys existing barriers of communities. Thus, money "becomes the *real community*" (Marx, qtd. in *U*, 168). Marx, Simmel, and Henry James (cf. *U*, 168) all perceive money as an artifact that erodes class distinctions, but in a money economy there are always ways to measure wealth and classify those who do or do not possess it. Popular films, such as *Fort Apache* and *Koyaansiqatsi*, and press coverage in the New York Times depicting the South Bronx as a "symbol of America's woes" are a few examples of these classifications (*BN*, 33). Rap music is another example. Returning to "The Message," we see depictions of joblessness, minimal access to health care (it may be the only song to lament the rupture of one's sacroiliac), and dependence on public transportation, all hallmarks of lower

socioeconomic status. One verse captures the growth of a young resident of such a maligned area.

> A child is born with no state of mind
>
> Blind to the ways of mankind
>
> God is smiling on you, but he's frowning, too
>
> Cause only God knows what you go through
>
> You'll grow in the ghetto, livin' second rate
>
> And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
>
> The places you play and where you stay
>
> Looks like one great big alley way
>
> You'll admire all the number book takers
>
> Thugs, pimps, and pushers, and the big money makers
>
> Driving big cars, spendin' twenties and tens
>
> And you wanna grow up to be just like them
>
> Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers
>
> Pick-pocket peddlers, even panhandlers
>
> You say I'm cool, I'm no fool
>
> But then you wind up droppin' out of high school
>
> Now you're unemployed, all null 'n' void
>
> Walkin' 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd
>
> Turned stick up kid, but look what you done did
>
> Got sent up for a eight-year bid ("The Message," Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five)

Here economics again plays a vital role—the child envies the various workers he sees, all of whom operate within an economy that the song positions firmly in the ghetto. It is implied that "thugs, pimps, and pushers" are only found in places like the South Bronx or Flint, and not on Fifth Avenue or in the well-to-do Detroit suburbs. The implication is that these "role models" will perpetuate the cycle of this dark economy in these neighborhoods by influencing young, impressionable minds to follow them. Of course, as Cornel West points out using one of his favorite images, in situations like these, "It is important to steer a course between the Scylla of environmental determinism and the Charybdis of a blaming-the-victims perspective" (West, *Race Matters*, 57). Just being around drug dealers is not sufficient justification for becoming a drug dealer. Also notable in these lyrics is the phrase, "spendin' twenties and tens." The intent is to illustrate the wealth of these black market capitalists, but from a 2006 perspective, the effect is laughable. No rapper in this era would rhyme about "spendin' twenties and tens" except, perhaps, with regard to a foe's financial impotence. In part because of Diddy (formerly P. Diddy and Puff Daddy) and his song, "It's All about the Benjamins," the term "Benjamins" has entered popular usage as a slang term for one-hundred-dollar bills, which feature the visage of Benjamin Franklin. In 2001's "U Don't Know," rapper Jay-Z calculates his personal wealth at $120 million, which is by now a vast underestimate. This drastic change in scope for rappers illustrates not only how commercially successful the genre is now, but also stays true to the earlier goal of making a better life for oneself despite hardships.

Perhaps because of these seemingly contradictory view points—one claiming a lack of wealth and the other boasting of one's immense fortune—some critics contend

that rap perpetuates negative stereotypes, bolstering these stereotypes to both naïve

consumers and the people living within the very communities being discussed. This is a

valid criticism, but unfortunately the ultimate problem is one of interpretation.

Sociological studies, understandably, deal with groups and group behavior. In rap music,

on the other hand, perhaps no word is more ubiquitous than "I." Rappers are not

sociologists; they are poets. We don't ask the poet Countee Cullen to speak for all those

who have been called "nigger" with his "Incident," so why should we ask that of

rappers?[8] Dante doesn't argue that the solution to every midlife crisis is to take a tour of

Hell with Virgil; he just presents this option. The first-person "I" in "Incident" or "The

Inferno" may not even be the author; it may just be a speaker. So it is for rap, as well.[9]

Critics who too quickly condemn rap for its ill effects may be too hastily grouping this art

with other popular music, which is often regarded as ephemeral. Rap, as a postmodern

art form, recognizes its minute lifespan—rappers often cite the year of production in their

songs, knowingly aware that by the following year their "hot track" will have been

replaced by another—but does not correlate this half-life, which is essentially a reflection

of the temporality of popular culture, with triviality. Critics would do well to do the

same.

Still, given the conditions many rappers describe, it should come as no surprise

when the protagonists of their works struggle against violent oppression. Not every

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[8] I have chosen to write out the words "nigga" and "nigger," as most of the artists I cite also do. There is, however, a distinction to be made. "Nigga" is often a term of endearment, and in Tupac Shakur's definition, stands for, "Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accomplished." "Nigger" is a derogatory term.
[9] Still, no matter *who* is speaking, the speaker's position remains the same. It is always "within-the-world," and not as an "object-in-the-world" (Mudede). Charles Mudede further explores the metaphysics of hip-hop in his article, "In the World with Hiphop and Heidegger."

rapper accumulates $120 million, but those who do merit recognition.[10] Others have to deal with external and internal pressures, as exemplified by that famous chorus from "The Message."

> Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge
>
> I'm tryin' not to lose my head
>
> It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
>
> How I keep from goin' under ("The Message," Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five)

Here the rapper, Mellie Mel (one of the Furious Five), captures his internal struggle in the first couplet and the external, environmental oppression in the second. Another way to think of this ongoing negotiation of power between the state and the individual comes from the late Eazy-E, a member of the group N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude), in the song "Fuck tha Police." He rhymes, of police, "They put out my picture with silence / Cause my identity by itself causes violence" ("Fuck tha Police," N.W.A.) At least three relationships of state and individual are available in reading these lines. As the police represent the state and its oppression, their actions are also representative of the state's. Thus, in one reading, the state incites violence by propagating images of Eazy-E, which induce violence on the part of others, presumably through a mechanism similar to a Pavlovian response. The state manipulates the image of the rebel who opposes it—in fact, the rebel defines himself through his opposition to the state—for its own purposes.

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[10] In a later song, "Moment of Clarity," Jay-Z admits that he sacrificed some skills in order to seek popular approval (naming two other rappers, Talib Kweli and Common [formerly Common Sense] who are known for their adroitness), and he attempts to justify his actions: "Still so, truth be told, I'd probably be, lyrically, Talib Kweli / Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense / But I did five mil-, I ain't been rhymin' like Common since . . . And I can't help the poor if I'm one of them / So I got rich and gave back to me, that's the win-win."

Only a state truly confident in its own power, oppressive enough to squash any rebellion, and secure in its appraisal of the low probability of such a mobilization among the oppressed would dare utilize such a technique. Such, claims Eazy-E, is the opinion of the United States government with regard to residents of the ghetto, especially South Central Los Angeles, Eazy-E's home. A second reading of these lines produces the image of Eazy-E as violent destructor: he, by himself, "causes violence." This is his individual reaction to the political violence of the state, which essentially redirects one kind of violence into another. The third reading of these lines reads something like, "The formation of my identity is in itself violent, and therefore cannot avoid the creation of violence." Again, the state is read as a controlling force. However, here the state is also reacting to a perception of black male identity, which it has itself fostered. The state's control of this perception increases when others respond with the desire for more governmental protection from the perceived threat of the impoverished community.

The inevitable result of this increased dependence on the state for protection is the formation of a space that is very nearly totalitarian in its ethos. Now, it is absurd to claim that this cycle can actually, literally give rise to a totalitarian state. What is not absurd— or even particularly far-fetched—is to state that this cycle can restrict liberty, oppress, and allocate exceptional power to a corrupt police force, producing the effects of a totalitarian regime. The produced effect is like that of "a regime in which state violence is practised on society as a whole, a system of generalized, detailed coercion" wherein the "representation of the People-as-One" functions to produce a homogenous body of the people in the public's view, with the ruler as the head of the body (Lefort, 292, 297). Granted, the space occupied by this niche is remarkably small, but part of its power is

derived from its moderate ambition; ghetto residents live in these conditions every day, but to skeptical outsiders, these descriptions seem exaggerated and clichéd, allowing the regime to survive without outside confrontation.[11]

Lefort's definition of totalitarianism, mentioned above, and his "People-as-One" condition, are no more than a slight rethinking of our existing assumption that the ruling party treats oppressed individuals as one homogenous community. In the "People-as-One" model, all people are part of one community, and the ruling party, even as it gains power, identifies itself as a party of the people. It invents "the Other" to combat enemies "in the name of an ideal of social prophylaxis" (Lefort, 298).

As such, the depiction of the ghetto as a place organized according to a totalitarian structure relies on the assumption that the ghetto is a fundamentally different place from such places as the suburbs (see note below), rural America, or even more upscale areas of the same city (as in the "dual city" metaphor employed by Mollenkopf and Castells). This hypothesis coincides nicely with Frantz Fanon's depictions of colonial societies in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Given the extensive immigration to New York city in the 1970s (and, obviously, earlier), the patterns of immigration and segregation that have produced the ghettoes in other major American metropolitan areas, and the *de facto* classification of ghetto residents as second-class citizens, this analogy is truly pertinent to my discussion. Fanon, writing in 1961, could not foresee the rise of hip-hop, but his observations could easily describe the formation of that culture with little

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[11] Of course, this disbelief is complicated by rap music's popularity, especially with white, suburban teenagers. This demographic now represents the largest number of rap consumers in the country, prompting some critics to examine the role of "white kids" in the hip-hop community (cf. Kitwana, *White Kids*). White consumers who do not experience those conditions may be utilizing the music as an escapist fantasy; however, this consumption does not diminish the horrible conditions found in urban environments. It is an unfortunate aspect of rap that there appears to be very little correlation between increased consumption and increased recognition of the bleak conditions that produce, at least in part, the art.

rhetorical alteration. He writes of two kinds of societies: capitalist and colonial. The colonial society is characterized by "the language of pure force" on the part of policemen, the dehumanization of the "native," and an economy wherein "the cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (Fanon, 38-42). Clearly, Fanon's vision of colonial society mirrors in many ways the modern inner-city society I have been describing as totalitarian. I do not believe these views are mutually exclusive; instead, they are simply two ways of approaching the same condition. Fanon also recognizes the desire to escape from the colonial society, the desire for "getting over," as it is termed in hip-hop vernacular.

> The settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same time it is a world of which he is envious. We have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler—not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler. This hostile world, ponderous and aggressive because it fends off the colonized masses with all the harshness it is capable of, represents not merely a hell from which the swiftest flight possible is desirable, but also a paradise close at hand which is guarded by terrible watchdogs. (Fanon, 52-3)

The distinction between "becoming" and "replacing" the settler succinctly captures the essence of the typical rapper's attempt to "get over." He does not want to become what he hates; he simply wants to experience the other side of the oppressor/oppressed relationship, to gain the elusive power/knowledge of which Foucault speaks. In doing so, of course, he can depose the previously powerful; their knowledge is no longer that-which-is-powerful, while his is. This takeover occasionally manifests itself in rappers

who achieve substantial commercial success. They run the risk of losing authenticity (or "street cred," short for "credibility"), which can usually be maintained only through an awkward dance in which the artists do their best to market their presumably more authentic roots. However, I would contend—and I believe Fanon would agree—that the recognition of one's self in the *nouveaux* powerful allays most concerns, especially when those concerns relate to the transition that led to the new power structure. When the ruling body is a familiar one, some tension dissipates automatically. This takeover, when it occurs, also forces outsiders to reevaluate the aforementioned skeptical disbelief that is the standard response to claims regarding the conditions in the ghetto. Following such a coup, there are suddenly more credible (read: powerful) sources making the same, once unbelievable, claims.

Songs such as "Fuck tha Police," then, may be read as attempts to bring about this coup. In this song, the totalitarian state is represented by the body of a police officer, who seeks to tyrannize black, urban, impoverished males. The song is an especially adept vehicle for this discussion because it interpolates "skits" within the song that depict violent acts by police. In fact, the framework of the song positions N.W.A. as judge, witness, prosecuting attorney, plaintiff, and jury of a trial in which "the police department" is the defendant ("Fuck tha Police," N.W.A.). The verses are presented as evidence for the prosecution's case, and at the end of the work, the defendant is found guilty of "being a redneck, white bread, sugar shit motherfucker" ("Fuck tha Police," N.W.A.). The subsequent removal of the white police officer from the courtroom illustrates a revolutionary power reversal typical of the potentially uplifting coup that is the driving force behind so many of the genre's masterpieces.

TAKEOVER:

CHALLENGING PRIOR CONSTRUCTIONS

So step away with your fistfight ways
Motherfucker, this ain't back in the day
    "Things Done Changed," The Notorious B.I.G.

I ain't hard-core, I don't pack a nine millimeter
Most of y'all gangsta rappers ain't hard-core neither
    "Honest Expression," Binary Star

We kill you motherfuckin' ants with a sledgehammer
Don't let me do it to you dunny 'cause I overdo it
So you won't confuse it with just rap music
    "Takeover," Jay-Z

Todd Boyd, in his 1994 article, "Check Yo Self, Before You Wreck Yo Self: Variations on a Political Theme in Rap Music and Popular Culture," begins by claiming that the emergence of gangsta rap and Spike Lee's "mainstreaming" of Malcolm X "mark the end of a political flirtation in rap music and by extension, African-American popular culture" (Boyd, 290). He then goes on to praise one gangsta rapper, Ice Cube, and one decidedly non-gangsta act, Arrested Development, for their continued—by his argument, anachronistic—devotion to political matters. Throughout the article, one gets the impression that Boyd wishes more acts were like Arrested Development—politically concerned, Afrocentric, and peaceful. He concedes that the group has its limitations. He further allows that Ice Cube, a gangsta rapper, has strengths that lie outside the scope of Arrested Development's purview. However, one gets the impression that Boyd views Ice Cube as the exception rather than the rule in the world of gangsta rap.

Arrested Development, now known as a one-hit wonder, excited critics and academics and won a Grammy for best new act, reflecting their commitment to positive

rhymes, denouncement of nihilism, and support of a collective black consciousness through an aesthetic that delighted in the return to one's (southern) roots. This was particularly exemplified in their hit, "Tennessee," which depicts the group revisiting a place that once viewed African-Americans as slaves in order to gain spiritual insight into their individual heritages and identities.

Earlier, I mentioned Tricia Rose's belief that connecting rap music directly to an African oral tradition does both components a disservice because this African oral tradition is disconnected from the true nature of rap (*BN*, 25-7). I wholeheartedly agree. However, in what is often termed the black musical tradition, there is some continuity. This line, as it is usually presented, runs from blues and gospel to jazz to funk to rap. Each new form takes something from the genre that preceded it and then proceeds to "riff" on that theme, to borrow a jazz term. One constant, though, is rebellion. Gospel and blues music used hidden texts to code routes along the Underground Railroad. Jazz revolted against conventions of style, form, and technique. Funk created previously-unheard sound collages. Rap appropriates and reinvigorates old sounds, turning them on their head; it creates a new vernacular; it uses technology in new ways; it exalts improvisation; it challenges authority; it re-imagines timing and rhythm; it addresses myriad subjects; and it revels in its heterogeneity. One thing it does not do is go gentle into that good night, which is why the peacefulness of Arrested Development honestly bothers me and it irks me when Boyd compares them to John Coltrane, who, even in his spiritual, self-reflective "A Love Supreme" mode still innovated and refused to conform. Arrested Development isn't "fight music," as Eminem describes his work ("Who

Knew"); it's music for middle-class baby boomers who want a token piece of a culture they don't want to try to understand.

Thankfully, I'm not the only one who's glad they broke up.[1] In his study of "ciphering" (also known as "freestyling," it is an entirely improvised activity in which rappers make up lyrics on the spot, often competing [or "battling"] against one another for lyrical supremacy) as literacy, Michael Newman finds that the teenage subjects of his study "expressed an active dislike for Arrested Development, Public Enemy, De La Soul, and KRS-One, all well-known conscious rap artists or crews" (Newman, 419).[2] The constant among those acts is not a lack of violence: De La Soul, like Arrested Development, promotes a nonviolent aesthetic, even going so far as to preach a motto of "D.A.I.S.Y." (DA Inner Sound, Y'all); KRS-One sarcastically promotes violence in some songs, including the classic "9 MM Goes Bang," which some critics have read as a gangsta anthem, even though, given KRS-One's body of work, it clearly should be read ironically; and Public Enemy, a group composed of black middle-class Long Islanders, is possibly the most militant, Afrocentric rap group ever. The constant is just what Newman states: these groups fall under his category of "conscious" rap, which "focus[es] on uplift and political awareness" (Newman, 404). This is in contrast to his two other categories: "hard-core or *gangsta* rap, focusing on stylized imagery and action, particularly associated with ghetto life," and "party rap, which emphasizes the beat over the wording" (Newman, 404). Newman goes on to list a few "hard-core" rappers preferred by the subjects: "Jay-Z, Wu Tang Clan (sic), 50 Cent, DMX, Nelly, Eminem,

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[1] *I'm* not saying that the disbandment is a symbol for the inherent limitations and inevitable failures of nonviolence, but *you* are free to read into it however you choose.
[2] The term "cipher" refers to a circle, which is the standard formation of rappers engaging in such a competition.

Tupac, Big Pun, and Ludicris (sic)" (Newman, 419).[3] Such categorization often seems to trivialize rappers who still make worthwhile contributions to the genre despite being *only* "party" rappers, or whatever flippant, dismissive adjective is applied to them. "Party rap" is a classification possibly unique to this article, but "gangsta rap" is quite often maligned as "conscious" rap's more violent, less intelligent younger brother. However, I believe that gangsta rap can be as politically aware as conscious rap, and that it is its violence that ultimately epitomizes this awareness. Luckily, Newman has provided us with a list of artists to whom we might turn for an exploration of this idea. To further restrict our search, we will limit ourselves to songs that were recorded in the 1990s, the heyday of gangsta rap.

In the development of gangsta rap, it is true that real, physical, usually gun-related violence became a ubiquitous presence. This violence did not appear out of nowhere, of course. It essentially reflects the growing discontentment with urban life in post-industrial, postmodern society; it is the postlude to Mellie Mel's, "don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge," if you will. One vivid account of this comes from Nas' "N. Y. State of Mind."

> Rappers I monkey flip 'em with the funky rhythm I be kickin'
>
> Musician, inflictin' composition of pain
>
> I'm like Scarface sniffin' cocaine
>
> Holdin a M-16, see with the pen I'm extreme, now
>
> Bulletholes left in my peepholes
>
> I'm suited up in street clothes
>
> Hand me a nine and I'll defeat foes

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[3] The standard spellings are "Wu-Tang Clan" and "Ludacris."

Y'all know my steelo with or without the airplay

I keep some E&J, sittin' bent up in the stairway

Or either on the corner bettin' Grants with the celo champs

Laughin' at baseheads, tryin' to sell some broken amps

G-Packs get off quick, forever niggas talk shit

Reminiscing about the last time the Task Force flipped

Niggas be runnin' through the block shootin'

Time to start the revolution, catch a body head for Houston

Once they caught us off guard, the Mac-10 was in the grass and

I ran like a cheetah with thoughts of an assassin

Pick the Mac up, told brothers, "Back up," the Mac spit

Lead was hittin' niggas, one ran, I made him backflip

Heard a few chicks scream, my arm shook, couldn't look

Gave another squeeze, heard it click yo, my shit is stuck

Try to cock it, it wouldn't shoot now I'm in danger

Finally pulled it back and saw three bullets up in the chamber

So now I'm jetting to the building lobby

And it was filled with children, probably couldn't see as high as I be

(So whatchu sayin?) It's like the game ain't the same

Got younger niggas pullin' the triggers bringin' fame to they name

And claim some corners, stickup kids, they run up on us

Fo'-fives and gauges, Macs in fact . . .

Beyond the walls of intelligence, life is defined

I think of crime when I'm in a New York state of mind ("N.Y. State of Mind," Nas)

This classic verse—the first on the phenomenal "Illmatic," Nas' debut album—has Nas delivering a potent first-person narrative of a gunfight.[4] The positioning of the gunfight in the present tense creates a more enthralling experience for the listener, who feels like an accomplice to Nas' character. Nas also laments the increasingly younger ages of "stickup kids," who attempt to rule the neighborhood through gang violence.[5] It is unclear whether the "the building lobby" provides sanctuary for Nas or whether the "children" there are the ones shooting at him, but either way, it is clear that this real violence endangers children, either through direct or unintentional involvement. I do not believe the argument that verses such as this one glorify violence in any way; this is no celebration of the power granted by gun ownership or of any gangster lifestyle.[6] Besides the actual incident he describes, Nas also delves into metaphorical approaches to violence, at one point comparing his pen to an M-16, and at another declaring, "Hand me a nine [millimeter] and I'll defeat foes." While this could certainly refer to the actual homicide of his enemies, the word "defeat" implies a contest similar to the aforementioned battling. These interpretations are nothing new; they are the standard ones employed by rap scholars. A more extraordinary line of inquiry begins with the first

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[4] "Illmatic" means "good," although interestingly, Nas only uses the term twice on the whole album. Once is in the final track, "It Ain't Hard to Tell," in which he claims, "I'm ill, plus matic." The other use occurs in the obligatory introductory track, which is essentially a conversation among Nas and some friends. The final line of this track, "The Genesis," is Nas saying, "Representing is illmatic," meaning not only that representing one's 'hood or place is a fine idea, but also, I believe, that representation, or mimesis, is worthwhile—a perceptive introduction to a work of art that claims to authentically depict life in the ghetto.
[5] For an exploration of this theme in cinema and an astonishing look at life in the ghetto of another country, see the remarkable film *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*.
[6] This reflection on what is often called "senseless" violence is also evident in such tracks as Wu-Tang Clan's "Tearz," which brilliantly and chillingly contrasts the rapper's gleeful reminiscence of a killing with the subsequent murder of his younger brother.

line: "Rappers I monkey flip 'em with the funky rhythm I be kickin'." Linguistically, the internal rhyming of "monkey flip 'em" with "funky rhythm" immediately strikes the listener, especially the strident "-k[e]y" sound. However, at first glance, the word "monkey" seems out of place—surely the line would also work well without "monkey" and "funky"? The insertion of this word clearly serves a purpose. My argument is that "monkey" modifies "flip 'em" in such a way as to confer on it an additional meaning. Without "monkey," the phrase "flip 'em" can mean that Nas literally flips rappers (foreshadowing the later "backflip") with his music, reversing the familiar reading of weapon-as-music to music-as-weapon. It could also represent a generic threat and/or claim of superiority. Furthermore, it might mean that Nas' music causes competitors to change direction, as if, upon hearing him, they collectively go "back to the drawing board."

With "monkey," though, Signifyin(g) enters the equation.[7] Rather, it *explicitly* enters the equation, for in African-American rhetoric, Signifyin(g) is omnipresent. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines them using quotients, signification in white discourse = signified / signifier = concept / sound-image, while black Signifyin(g) = rhetorical figures / signifier (*TSM*, 48). "In other words," he adds, "the relation of signification itself has been critiqued by a black act of (re)doubling. The black term of *Signifyin(g)* has as its associated concept all of the rhetorical figures subsumed in the term *Signify*" (*TSM*, 48). The relationship between signifying and Signifyin(g) perhaps requires some elaboration. Anthony Easthope, as cited in Gates' book, states, "The presence of meaning along the syntagmatic chain necessarily depends upon the absence of the Other, the rest of

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[7] Here I follow the spelling convention of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who uses "signifying" to represent the white use of the term and "Signifyin(g)" to denote black usage. See *TSM*, p. 46 for further elaboration.

language, from the syntagmatic chain" (qtd. in *TSM*, 50). Gates writes, "Signifyin(g) . . . is the Other of discourse; but it also constitutes the black Other's discourse as its rhetoric" (*TSM*, 50). Thus, the relationship between signifying and Signifyin(g) is very much like the relationship between whites and blacks. The existence of both depends upon the existence and continual resistance of the other. It is as though "a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe" (*TSM*, 49).

So what does this have to do with monkeys? For one, Gates' book is titled *The Signifying Monkey*, in honor of the famous tale of the same name. The Signifyin(g) Monkey of the story uses Signifyin(g) to trick the tale's Lion—whose social status as king of the jungle the monkey envies but whose physical prowess intimidates him—into getting into a fight with the Elephant. He does so by claiming that the Elephant made some inappropriate remarks about the Lion's wife, mother, and/or grandmother (there are several versions of the story, which all differ in some minute ways). The Lion storms off to confront the Elephant, who politely denies making such remarks. However, once the Lion presses the issue, the Elephant is forced to retaliate, and he promptly trounces the Lion. Defeated and dethroned, the Lion returns to his original territory, hoping to exact revenge on the Monkey and thereby restore some pride.[8] The Monkey, of course, uses Signifyin(g) to taunt the Lion when he first reappears, but as soon as the Monkey finds himself on the jungle floor, he backs off his taunts. The Lion threatens the Monkey at this point, in one version saying, "I'm not gonna whip your ass 'cause that Elephant whipped mine, / I'm gonna whip your ass for signifyin'" (*TSM*, 57). Interestingly, the

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[8] No pun intended, although given the function and nature of Signifyin(g), I cannot think of a better place to insert one.

Lion also attempts to Signify, by claiming that he didn't actually "get beat" (*TSM*, 57).

The Monkey sees through this lie, though, escapes (multiple times, in some versions) and

lives to Signify again. "He said, 'You might as well stop, there ain't no use tryin' /

because no motherfucker is gonna stop me from signifyin'" (*TSM*, 58).

Furthermore, Gates notes that insult is just "one mode of a rhetorical strategy"—

Signifyin(g)—and that this strategy's direct intent is not simply to insult but to "disturb

the seemingly coherent linearity of the syntagmatic chain of signifiers" (*TSM*, 58). Thus,

the "materiality of the signifier . . . not only ceases to be disguised but comes to bear

prominently as the dominant mode of discourse" (*TSM*, 58). Not only is the meaning

(semantics) of the word important, but so too—even more so—is its sound, its

materiality, its "thingness" (*TSM*, 58). The following charts are excerpted from Gates'
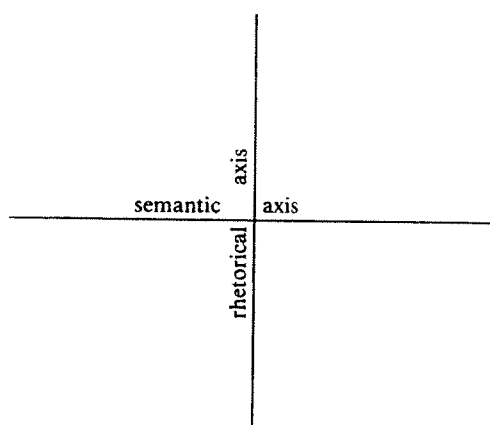
book, and attempt to illustrate this distinction.

Chart 1. The Sign, "Signification"
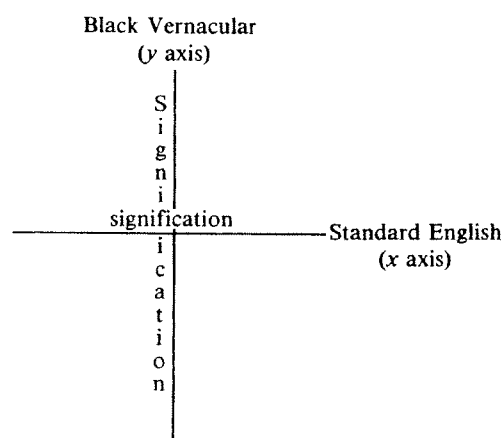
Figure 1. The Sign, Signification

Chart 2. Black and Standard English

Figure 2. Black and Standard English.

So when Nas inserts the word "monkey" into this line, he is using the word as a

metonymical reference for Signifyin(g) *and* himself Signifyin(g). He can "defeat foes"

just like the Monkey can, and he draws attention to the sounds of the line with the

"monkey flip 'em" / "funky rhythm" pairing. In addition, I have thus far managed to neglect the potential of "monkey" to mean something like "brown primate that lives in trees and is closely related to apes and humans." It is simple to get caught up in multiple meanings in rap because, as stated previously, *layering* is so integral and prevalent. Words accumulate multiple, layered meanings (e.g., signifying and Signifyin[g]). Mikhail Bakhtin describes these instances as double-voiced words, which have been altered by "inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation" (*TSM*, 50). Gary Saul Morson expands on this:

> The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position") *and* the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. I find it helpful to picture a double-voiced word as a special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluating" (quoted in *TSM*, 50).

Appropriately, this monkey image reacts to the Signifyin(g) Monkey's verbal abuse with violence of its own entering into a discourse that negotiates various tropes and interpretations (see "The Figures of Signification").

Of course, rap music also engages various interpretations. Concordantly, there have emerged multiple elucidations of the music's violence. The most common reading positions the "gun" as a microphone or some other symbol of verbal prowess. Other common images of violence in rap depict responses to the environmental violence of the

ghetto and manifestations of misogynistic violence, usually in rape or physical abuse. Environmental violence counts among its many antagonists the Wu-Tang Clan and Jay-Z, whose "C.R.E.A.M." and "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)," respectively, famously discuss this issue.

Figure 3. The Figures of Signification

Chart 4. The Figures of Signification

Rhetorical Trope	Bloom's Revisionary Ratio	Afro-American Signifyin(g) Trope	Classical Yoruba	Lexically Borrowed Yoruba
Irony	Clinamen	Signifyin(g) ("Nigger business" in the West Indies)	Rírán (èràn)	Áiróni
Synecdoche	Tessera	Calling out of one's name		Mẹtọ́nímì
Metonymy	Kenosis			
Hyperbole, litotes	Daemonization	Stylin' or woofing ("Flash" in the West Indies)	Ìhàlè (Èpọ́n)	
Metaphor	Askesis	Naming	Àfiwé (eléloó)	Métáfò (indirect "naming")*
			Àfiwé gaan	Símìlì (direct "naming")*
Metalepsis	Apophrades	Capping	Afíkún; Àjàmọ́; Èní	

* N.B. "Naming" is an especially rich trope in Yoruba. Positive naming is called *Oriki*, while negative naming is called *Ìnagije*. Naming is also an especially luxurious (if potentially volatile) trope in the Afro-American vernacular tradition. "Naming" someone and "Calling [someone] Out of [his] name" are among the most commonly used tropes in Afro-American vernacular discourse. Scores of proverbs and epigrams in the black tradition turn upon figures for naming.

"C.R.E.A.M." (Cash Rules Everything Around Me) clearly pays attention to the kind of urban capitalism to which David Harvey is so attuned. The driving idea behind the song is that economic disparities creates social divisions and drive the impoverished to crime. Its famous opening line, "I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times

side," situates the narrative in the ghetto of New York City—that is, the section of the city one reads about in the pages of the named newspaper.

The title, "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)," implies the difficulties of living in the ghetto, so Jay-Z does not waste much time enumerating these hardships. The most surprising twist of this song is its chorus, which is derived entirely from the musical "Annie."

> It's the hard knock life for us
>
> It's the hard knock life, for us
>
> Steada treated, we get tricked
>
> Steada kisses, we get kicked
>
> It's the hard knock life ("Hard Knock Life [Ghetto Anthem]," Jay-Z)

Pitting this sample, with its female vocals, melodic delivery, and obvious age, against Jay-Z's deep monotone, contemporary subject matter, and the song's dark, bass-driven beat, jars the listener violently. At the same time, this chorus summarizes a major theme of the genre so well that it's almost ponderous why no one did it earlier. While the musical's "us" refers to orphans, it easily could encapsulate residents of the ghetto, minorities, or rappers. Additionally, the contrasts between "treated" and "tricked" and "kisses" and "kicked" superbly present the image of an Other who has more; the alliteration captures the ear, and the familiar Halloween reference layers an additional meaning on an already-complex image.

Both of these songs deserve far more analysis, but this thematic concern for environmental violence/oppression and the violence it produces should by now be familiar, so let us proceed. Misogynistic violence accounts for a good deal of Eminem's

work, so it is only appropriate that we examine one of his songs as a synecdoche for this type of violence as it appears in the genre. His song "Guilty Conscience" revolves around the concept of Eminem and his mentor Dr. Dre playing the roles of the proverbial angel (Dre) and devil (Eminem) on one's shoulders. Needless to say, these personas are not completely accurate: Eminem pens songs for his daughter, while Dre's career dates back to the early days of gangsta rap when he produced "Fuck tha Police" and created the classic album *The Chronic*—not exactly typical angelic behavior. The song features three scenarios, each of which centers on a central decision to be made by a character who receives advice from Eminem and Dr. Dre. The three decisions may be summarized by three questions: Should Eddie rob a liquor store and kill the female store clerk? Should Stan take advantage of an intoxicated female minor? How should Grady deal with his unfaithful wife? In the first two scenarios, Dr. Dre—with Eddie—and Eminem—regarding Stan—each record one "victory" of persuasion, based on who has the last word in each verse. In the final scenario, it is not as clear. (Lines in parentheses indicate that the line is delivered by the other rapper.)

[Announcer] (spoken)

Meet Grady, a twenty-nine year old construction worker.

After coming home from a hard day's work,

He walks in the door of his trailer park home

To find his wife in bed with another man.

[Dr. Dre]

Alright, calm down, relax, stop breathin' . . .

[Eminem]

Fuck that shit, you just caught this bitch cheatin'

While you at work, she's with some dude tryin' to get off?!

Fuck slittin' her throat, cut this bitch's head off!

[Dr. Dre]

Wait! What if there's an explanation for this shit?

(What? She tripped? Fell? Landed on his dick?!)

Alright Shady, maybe he's right Grady

But think about the baby before you get all crazy

[Eminem]

Okay! Thought about it, still wanna stab her?

Grab her by the throat, get your daughter, and kidnap her?

That's what I did, be smart, don't be a retard

You gonna take advice from somebody who slapped Dee Barnes?

[Dr. Dre]

Whatchu say? (What's wrong? Didn't think I'd remember?)

I'ma kill you motherfucker!

[Eminem]

Uh-uh! Temper, temper!

Mr. Dre? Mr. N.W.A.?

Mr. AK comin' straight outta Compton, y'all better make way?

How in the fuck you gonna tell this man not to be violent?

[Dr. Dre]

'Cause he don't need to go the same route that I went

Been there, done that . . . aw fuck it . . .

What am I sayin'? Shoot 'em both Grady, where's your gun at?

{gun fires, is cocked, fires again} ("Guilty Conscience," Eminem)

Dre's reversal here represents a comic irony that plays on his earlier peaceful urgings. It is as though Eminem's reminder of his "Straight Outta Compton" days reawakens his repressed violent nature. Also, I personally feel that the last two lines are tacked on to preserve his image as a gangsta, and that the avuncular "'Cause he don't need to go the same route that I went" is the true moral of the tale. Still, the shock of the final two lines is important: the sharp contrast to Dre's other lines complicates his persona, making it a more compelling character, and is so brazenly violent that it focuses all of the listener's attention on the two gunshots at the conclusion of the song. The song seems to be asking, are these characters—Eddie, Stan, Grady, Eminem, Dre—redeemable? Does societal pressure weigh too heavily to be overcome? When is men at his basest, and how does he overcome this nature to become a productive member of society? These are no minor questions; indeed, as stated, they are beyond the scope of this essay. However, in many ways they form the very crux of the issue at hand by illustrating the violence of society

and the inevitable violent response. The misogyny forces the listener to pay attention, but the song is not "about" violence toward women. It is about the shock effect itself, the move away from complacency and toward action. Violent action? Perhaps. Regardless, the song is not an espousal of rape or murder, but a reminder that we all are inherently violent when we reach our breaking point. Eminem, who has made a career out of shocking listeners and transcending boundaries, here surpasses the limited, reductionary "ghetto as cause" view to present a broader vision. This marks a critical transition for rap.

Thus, even these "simple" interpretations of the violence in rap music prove to be more complex than originally thought. Still, some songs cannot be aptly understood using these available interpretations—misogyny and gun/microphone—and therefore, we must invent new readings. Three cases in which these readings are inadequate, even while retaining my self-imposed limitations of select artists and the 1990s timeframe, stand out: Wu-Tang Clan's "Protect Ya Neck" and "A Better Tomorrow," and Nas' "I Gave You Power."

One frustrating aspect of rap scholarship is the difficulty in finding reliable sources of lyrics. Occasionally, though, fortune intercedes. Such is the case with *The Wu-Tang Manual*, authored by group member The RZA, which provides lyrics for a few songs, as well as the author's glossing of these works. Although this song's uses of violence are semantically very interesting, I am not as interested in them for my purposes here as I am in another aspect of the song. Also, The RZA does an excellent job of exploring the many uses of violence here, shedding invaluable light on the thought

processes and artistry of the Wu-Tang Clan.[9] The element of the song that sets it apart is its use of censorship. Although the lyrics presented by The RZA are complete, the actual song bleeps out many offensive words, an interpretive act of violence in itself. In a genre of music so synonymous with obscenity, this song stands alone in its self-imposed regulation. Understanding the reasoning behind this move presents some difficulty, though. One interpretation reads the censorship as an appropriate "Fuck you" (and not, "F--- you") to those who cry, "Obscenity!" at the mere mention of rap music. The writing of Harry M. Clor bolsters another argument. He writes, "Obscenity can be seen, in part, as an effort to escape from the tensions and burdens of civilization. Obscenity can be seen as the endeavor to throw off, for a time, the restraints and refinements of our higher humanity and return to things primal and elemental" (Clor, 257). Because obscenity *is* such a part of rap, and may ordinarily be seen through this lens of "escape," the song's flip of this concept works particularly well. Therefore, while this song *may* be read as a simple example of the gun/microphone metaphor, its more complex meanings are only available through another avenue.

"A Better Tomorrow" offers one of the most unique takes on America to come out of popular art. The RZA raps:

> Took two drags off the blunts, and started breaking down the flag
>
> The blue is for the Crips, the red is for the Bloods
>
> The white is for the cops, and the stars come from the clubs
>
> Or the slugs that ignites, through the night, by the dawn

---

[9] To preserve continuity while offering the reader a glimpse of this unique vision, I have inserted these lyrics at the end of the chapter, rather than at this immediate point.

> Early light, why is sons fighting for the stripe ("A Better Tomorrow," Wu-Tang
>
> Clan)

It would be simple to dismiss this insightful picture because of the reference to

marijuana. It would also be easy to sidestep that reference completely. Reality is more

complex than either misinterpretation would like us to believe. Drug use is a reality in

the ghetto, but so is creative political discourse, so while we must not condone illicit drug

use, we must take the good with the bad and accept both as reality. More provocative

here are the strong comparisons drawn between the American flag and various violent

facets of society, as though violence and America go hand in hand. The Bloods and

Crips are represented by their respective gang colors; police are portrayed with white

because RZA sees most cops as white racists; the stars are either celebrities (whose

unattainable status we lust for) or bullets ("slugs"), which burst through the night in a

flash of light. RZA even manages to insert part of "The Star-Spangled Banner" to

complement his other American imagery. The last clause of this rhyme could mean a few

things. The obvious reading is a straight question wherein the word "stripe" stands in for

the entire flag: "Why is sons fighting for the stripe?"[10] RZA here asks why any self-

respecting person would fight for the country he has just associated with gang violence,

racism, guns, and unequal wealth distribution. Another possible version of the line

features a question and an answer: "Why is sons fighting? For the stripe." In this

rendering, it is unlikely that "stripe" retains its "flag" meaning without any trace of irony.

Instead, it suggests the uniform of a soldier, which fills with stripes as the soldier's rank

increases. Thus, "sons" might fight for rank, for recognition, for all that this recognition

means—increased status, a way out of the ghetto, a mark of distinction recognized across

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[10] In African-American Vernacular English, this is not an incorrect construction.

cultures, a life beyond Bloods and Crips. The violence here is deeply entwined with American society, and RZA reflects on this violence with an extended metaphor on the flag. This is yet another illustration of a complex figure located in rap music that usually goes unnoticed.

"I Gave You Power" is unique among rap songs because of its highly original concept. In this song, Nas takes on the persona of a gun, viewing the world from a perspective that laments the frequency with which he is called upon to inflict damage, eventually exerting his power at a crucial moment, deserting his owner and attempting to end a cycle of violence that has dominated his life. The victory is bittersweet, however, for as soon as his master is defeated, his killer retrieves the loser's weapon, presumably beginning another such cycle. Nas the rapper sums up this turn of events in two concise lines: "Now I'm happy / Until I felt somebody else grab me" ("I Gave You Power," Nas). The workings of power and knowledge are especially complex in this song; it is unclear who gives power to whom in the tale. While Nas the gun certainly provides his owner with a good deal of clout with other humans, the owner simultaneously sacrifices some autonomy to Nas. As Nas the gun's knowledge of his surroundings and realization of his own role in the violence around him increase, he gains enough power to desert his owner in the heat of battle, ultimately causing his owner's demise. The implications for revolution are clear here, and they are made even more potent because of Nas the artist's clear anti-gun position. His revolt is definitely one against violence, yet it is violent in nature as well. Nas the artist thus comments that while violence can certainly beget violence, it also has the potential to end violence.

It would be a task of Homeric proportions to catalog all instances of violence in gangsta rap. Still, from these brief examples, we see remarkable instances of political commentary in a genre supposedly devoid of any social conscience. Even the rappers who supposedly personify gangsta rap and all its popular appeal contribute rhymes that would perhaps be more at home under Boyd's category of "conscious rap."

Of course, no discussion of violence in gangsta rap would be complete without some thoughts on Tupac Shakur, also known as 2pac or simply 'Pac. No rapper in the 1990s—perhaps no rapper ever—captivated the public's imagination the way Tupac did. Surely, very few rappers attracted controversy in the same way. From his background as the son of a crack-addicted former Black Panther of a mother to his multiple criminal arrests and convictions, Shakur became "the nigga you love to hate" even more than that phrase's progenitor, Ice Cube. At the same time, however, Shakur had the power to inspire, as in his ode to women, "Keep Ya Head Up," or his tribute to his mother, "Dear Mama." Tupac, more than most rappers, was aware of and embraced the inherent contradictions of his position: he was successful yet expected to stay in touch with his lower-class roots; he referred to women as "bitches" yet wrote the aforementioned paeans to women; he hoped to write a "thug life" (a phrase he commandeered for an acronym, "The Hate You Give Little Infants Fucks Everyone") manifesto detailing a plan for peaceful revolution against political oppression, and he wrote songs filled with incredible hatred, such as "Hit 'Em Up," which chronicled a fictional extramarital affair between Tupac and the wife of his chief rival, The Notorious B.I.G. These contradictions are apparent in the first verse of "If I Die 2nite."

They say pussy and paper is poetry power and pistols

Plottin' on murderin' motherfuckers 'fore they get you

Picturin' pitiful punk niggas coppin pleas

Puffin' weed as I position myself to clock G's

My enemies scatter in suicidal situations

Never to witness the wicked shit that they was facin'

Pockets is packed with presidents, pursue your riches

Evadin' the playa-hatin' tricks, while hittin' switches

Bitches is bad-mouth, cause brawlin' motherfuckers is bold

But y'all some hoes, the game should be sewed

I'm sick of psychotic society somebody save me

Addicted to drama so even mama couldn't raise me

Even the preacher and all my teachers couldn't reach me

I run in the streets and puffin weed wit my peeps

I'm duckin' the cops, I hit the weed as I'm clutchin' my glock

Niggas is hot when I hit the block, what if I die tonight ("If I Die 2nite," 2pac)

The most arresting quality of this verse is the repeated alliteration. The first and third lines are especially forceful, and their harshness complements the topics of discussion as well as the bile evident in Tupac's delivery. This may be just the relationship of rhetoric and semantics that Gates envisions in *The Signifying Monkey*. 2pac also captures the violence of various situations in his life, but contrasts his arrogant claims of superiority with the final awareness of his own mortality, "What if I die tonight?" Contradictions and doubts exist everywhere when discussing Tupac. He may have been a gangsta
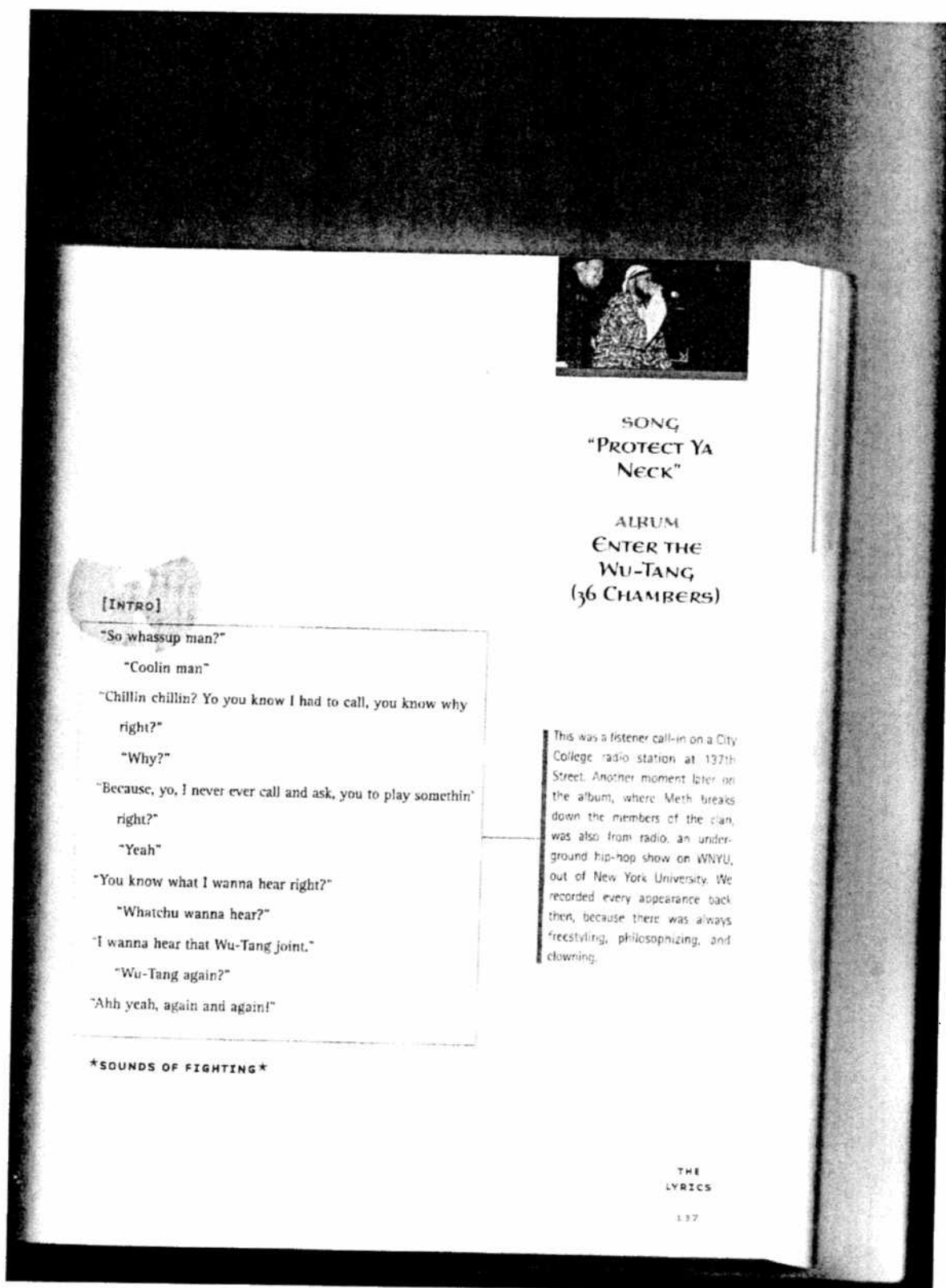
rapper, but he was one who recognized the limitations of that categorization and sought to remove himself from it, while often being dragged back into the associated lifestyle.

Eventually, though, Tupac's public persona of physical prowess, sexual virility, and arrogance caught up to him, and he was tragically murdered, dying on September 13, 1996. Six months later, perhaps as a retaliatory measure on the part of Tupac fans, The Notorious B.I.G. (real name: Christopher Wallace, but also known as Biggie Smalls) was also killed. Both murders remain unsolved, which some cite as evidence of conspiracy or of racism within the police departments investigating the crimes. Such theories aside, these murders present an opportunity to examine the effects of real, undeniable violence enacted upon an industry that markets such horrific events—the revenge of the commodity on the producer, in a way. Following the deaths of Shakur and Wallace, the East Coast-West Coast rivalry that had sprung up around the two rappers significantly declined, in no small part because the same media that helped promote this rivalry quickly realized its mistake in doing so. Rappers made concerted efforts to reduce the amount of gun violence in their songs. This marked a drastic shift in the industry, and a move away from the popular gangsta rap of the 1990s. Although it came too late, Tupac did eventually get the reform he desired.

Boyd may have been correct about the decline of explicit political awareness in gangsta rap, but his assumption that this inevitably meant the loss of such thought was ultimately wrong. It is clear that many gangsta rappers, throughout the 90s, retained a political consciousness, and even managed to delineate their views within the framework of an art form whose consumers expected to hear about guns, misogyny, and ghetto life. This feat echoes the inherent contradictions of the genre, its artists, and humanity itself, a

decidedly more important contribution to society than most casual onlookers would grant rap.

Figure 4. "Protect Ya Neck" Lyrics

SONG
"PROTECT YA
NECK"

ALBUM
ENTER THE
WU-TANG
(36 CHAMBERS)

[INTRO]

"So whassup man?"

"Coolin man"

"Chillin chillin? Yo you know I had to call, you know why
right?"

"Why?"

"Because, yo, I never ever call and ask, you to play somethin'
right?"

"Yeah"

"You know what I wanna hear right?"

"Whatchu wanna hear?"

"I wanna hear that Wu-Tang joint."

"Wu-Tang again?"

"Ahh yeah, again and again!"

★SOUNDS OF FIGHTING★

This was a listener call-in on a City College radio station at 137th Street. Another moment later on the album, where Meth breaks down the members of the clan, was also from radio, an underground hip-hop show on WNYU, out of New York University. We recorded every appearance back then, because there was always freestyling, philosophizing, and clowning.

THE
LYRICS

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[RZA AND METHOD MAN]

"Wu-Tang Clan comin' at ya . . ."

"Watch ya, step kid . . . Watch ya step, kid"

"Protect ya neck, kid . . ."

"Watch ya, step kid . . . Watch ya step, kid"

"So set it off."

"Watch ya, step kid . . . Watch ya step, kid"

"De Inspector Deck"

An ill boxer—the heavyweight champ from '70 to '73 and the first one to beat Muhammad Ali. Every MC feels like a boxer, because the mentality is the same: You know you're the best.

[INSPECTAH DECK]

I smoke on the mic like smokin' Joe Frazier

The hell raiser, raisin' hell with the flavor

Terrorize the jam like troops in Pakistan

Swingin' through your town like your neighborhood Spiderman

So uhh, tic toc and keep tickin'

While I get ya flippin' off the shit I'm kickin'

The Lone Ranger, code red, danger!

Deep in the dark with the art to rip the charts apart

The vandal, too hot to handle

Tevin Campbell was the thirteen-year-old R&B singer who had the hit "Goodbye" back in '91.

Ya battle, you're sayin' "Goodbye" like Tevin Campbell

Roughneck, Inspector Deck's on the set

The rebel, I make more noise than heavy metal

[RAEKWON]

The way I make the crowd go wild, sit back, relax, won't smile

Rae got it goin' on pal, call me the rap assassinator

Rhymes rugged and built like Schwarzenegger

And I'ma get mad deep like a threat, blow up your project

Then take all your assets

'Cause I came to shake the frame in half

With the thoughts that bomb shit like math!

So if ya wanna try to flip go flip on the next man

'Cause I grab the clip and hit ya with sixteen shots and more I got

Goin' to war with the meltin' pot

[METHOD MAN]

It's the Method Man for short Mr. Meth

Movin on your left, aah!

And set it off, get it off, let it off like a gat

I wanna break full, cock me back

Small change, they puttin shame in the game

I take aim and blow that nigga out the frame

And like *Fame* my style'll live forever

Niggaz crossin over, but they don't know no better

But I do, true, can I get a "suuue"

Enough respect due to the one-six-ooh

I mean O, yo check out the flow

like the Hudson or PCP when I'm dustin'

There's a double meaning: He's going to foil your plan, or literally, he's going to blow up your whole housing project, Timothy McVeigh-style.

His thoughts can be as explosive as the wisdom in the Divine Mathematics.

Either sixteen bullets or sixteen bars or lyrics—a deadly verse

New York City, so-called melting pot of different cultures.

He sings that line like a military drill in bootcamp because he's taking MCs to basic training

Reference to the 1980 movie about the New York City Performing Arts High School. In the theme song they sing, "I'm gonna live forever!"

The Shaolin call: "Suuuuuuuue." We used to holler that outside a building to get a nigga to come out, or in a club when there's a fight, to get your people at your back.

That's the building 160 in the Park Hill projects. It was the center—where we did business, hung out, and some of us lived. It was the heart of everything.

The Hudson River and the effects of PCP on an MC's brain—both have mad flow.

Niggaz off because I'm hot like sauce

The smoke from the lyrical blunt makes me *cough*

[U-GOD]

Ooh, what, grab my nut get screwed

Oww, here comes my Shaolin style

U-God's nickname, Baby U, or Baby Huey

True—B-A-ba-B-Y-U

to my crew with the "suuuuue"

[OL' DIRTY BASTARD]

Yeah, yeah, yeah . . .

Come on, baby baby

Come on, baby baby

Come on, baby baby

Come on . . .

[RZA]

Yo, ya best protect ya neck

[OL' DIRTY BASTARD]

First things first man you're fuckin with the worst

I'll be stickin' pins in your head like a fuckin' nurse

He'll attack any nigga whose game isn't tight, anyone who's slipping, sleeping, or falling off

I'll attack any nigga who's slack in his mack

A stack of bills or lyrics.

Come fully packed with a fat rugged stack

Shame on you when you stepped through to

The Ol' Dirty Bastard straight from the Brooklyn Zoo

And I'll be damned if I let any man

Come to my center, you enter the winter

Straight up and down that shit packed jam

You can't slam, don't let me get fool on him man

The Ol' Dirty Bastard is dirty and stinkin'

Ason Unique rollin' with the night of the creeps

Niggaz be rollin' with a stash ain't sayin'

Bite my style I'll bite your motherfuckin ass!

Both the center of his neighborhood and the center of his rhyme cipher. If you step into the ring in battle, you'll get frozen out by people not feeling you. But also, if you enter his nood, you enter a winter war—get made into a cold stiff.

An early ODB alias.

[GHOSTFACE KILLAH]

For cryin' out loud my style is wild so book me

Not long is how long that this rhyme took me

Ejectin' styles from my lethal weapon

My pen that rocks from here to Oregon

Here's more again, catch it like a psycho flashback

I love gats, if rap was a gun, you wouldn't bust back

I come with shit that's all types of shapes and sounds

And where I lounge is my stompin' grounds

I give a order to my peeps across the water

To go and snatch up props all around the border

And get far like a shootin' star

'Cause who I are, is dim in the light of Pablo Escobar

Point blank as I kick the square biz

There it is you're fuckin with pros and there it goes

Ghost was a fast writer back then. He actually wrote this rhyme the night of the recording. Now he takes his time more.

That's really true with Ghost's lyrics: They are colorful and abstract, their sound and shape as important as their meaning

Every nigga in the street game knew about Pablo Escobar, the world's richest, most powerful drug lord, head of the cocaine trade in Colombia until he got killed in '93. He was a real Scarface and Rae and Ghost were deep into those stories.

He keeps his business dealings straightforward.

We can assume Jesus had mad flow because he could rock any crowd. Like the Sermon on the Mount, he had hundreds of niggas captivated—just him, alone, on a mountaintop.

One hundred men, in biblical language.

I never said I follow all of Christ's teachings to the letter.

The black unemployment rate is more than twice that of whites. And it's kept growing and growing since the '60s.

Cold Chillin' records signed GZA in '89 and put out his solo joint, *Words from the Genius.* The label had Kool G Rap, Marley Marl, Big Daddy Kane—lots of giants—but they didn't always know what to do with artists. GZA had a frustrating experience with them, just like I did with Tommy Boy. We both realized we were better off together.

A twenty-watt light bulb only produces a very dim 210 lumens (the measurement of light). These rap labels didn't have enough light force, enough wisdom.

[RZA]

Yo chill with the feedback black we don't need that

It's ten o'clock ho, where the fuck's your seed at

Feelin' mad hostile, ran the apostle

Flowin' like Christ when I speaks the gospel

Stroll with the holy roll then attack the globe with the buckus style

The ruckus, ten times ten men committin' mad sin

Turn the other cheek and I'll break your fuckin' chin

Slayin' boom-bangs like African drums, we'll be

Comin' around the mountain when I come

Crazy flamboyant for the rap enjoyment

My clan increase like black unemployment

Yeah, another one dare, G-Gka-Genius

Take us the fuck outta here

[GZA]

The Wu is too slammin' for these Cold Killin' labels

Some ain't had hits since I seen Aunt Mabel

Be doin' artists in like Cain did Abel

Now they money's gettin' stuck to the gum under the table

That's what ya get when ya misuse what I invent

Your empire falls and ya lose every cent

For tryin to blow up a scrub

Now that thought was just as bright as a 20-watt light bulb

Should of pumped it when I rocked it

Niggaz so stingy they got short arms and deep pockets

This goes on in some companies

With majors they're scared to death to pump these

First of all, who's your A&R

A mountain climber who plays an electric guitar?

But he don't know the meaning of dope

When he's lookin' for a suit and tie rap

that's cleaner than a bar of soap

And I'm the dirtiest thing in sight

Matter of fact bring out the girls and let's have a mud fight

Artist and Repertoire, the cat who's supposed to be your representative at the label.

That's some definitive whiteboy shit. It identifies someone with no understanding of street ghetto culture

Literally and figuratively: He doesn't know his slang—doesn't know the meaning of the word "dope"—but also can't tell when something is dope.

★SOUNDS OF FIGHTING★

[OUTRO]

You best protect ya neck

You best protect ya neck

You best protect ya neck

You best protect ya neck

RE: DEFINITION:

POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN POST-9/11 RAP

This place will be about as stable as Iraq
Ride tracks similar to your girl's hair
Rock Sauconys but only got one pair
Just stop mocking me, just trying to get this place stirred
Trying to keep it fly
Doin' it from the Air Force One like George Bush
Get retarded like George Bush
Whether you're drinking or banging cocaine like George Bush
We got no room for fakes
Who do you think you are, George Bush?
Stay the fuck out of my Great Lakes
   "Meth-Head vs. McNugget," P.O.S.

Plus the government is smilin'
Cause they smell the scent of death blowin'
Just showin' that their plan's running precisely
This nigga oughta fit into a wood box nicely
   "A Glimpse at the Struggle," Mr. Lif

I'm way past the minimum, it's a verb millennium
My raps'll hold a gat to your back like Palestinians
   "RE: Definition," Black Star

   Just over four years after the bodies of Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace were put to rest, another violent attack, this time on the most important body in hip-hop, New York City, brought politics explicitly back into rap. The city, the womb of hip-hop, suffered the worst attack on American soil by a foreign foe in over a generation. The World Trade Center symbolized the financial heart of the country, meaning the attack destabilized the economic structure of the city and the nation (cf. Chernick).

   It is not without reason that I invoke bodily imagery, for some of the writing on totalitarianism, to which I have compared the conditions of the ghetto, speaks of the leader of a totalitarian regime as the "head" of the "body" of the people. This language usually applies to kings and their counterparts, regicides (cf. Foucault, *Discipline and*

Punish), but as Method Man of the Wu-Tang Clan points out, in America there are "No more kings, the cash rule everything now" ("A Better Tomorrow," Wu-Tang Clan). Lefort agrees: "The scientifico-technical model and the model of the production enterprise, governed by the rational division of labour . . . have in a sense taken hold of the whole society," a remark eerily similar to those made by David Harvey in his work (Lefort, 300). Modern kings are not always political figures; they are also the captains of industry who accumulate capital within urban settings and exploit the accompanying power/knowledge for their own gains, at the expense of the less fortunate.

Lefort also speaks of beheading the king in such a system. "The democratic revolution, for so long subterranean," he writes, "burst out when the body of the king was destroyed, when the body politic was decapitated and when, at the same time, the corporeality of the social was dissolved" (303). This beheading clearly takes the form of revolutionary violence; for the revolution to be successful, the people must reject the inflicted image of the body and "decapitate" the body politic. Bakhtin's work on Rabelais, written in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, further contributes to our understanding of such acts of uncrowning. However, his uncrowning is set in a world of "popular-festive forms," which differs slightly from the totalitarianism of Lefort. To say "slightly" seemingly understates the disparity, but in reality these systems as viewed in the ghetto differ very little. Clearly, the ghetto is not actually ruled under a totalitarian regime—it merely exists analogously to such a situation. The "popular-festive form" describes what I will term the *celebratory resistance* of African-Americans, whose tragic history has developed within the community a propensity for celebration in the face of

adversity. Indeed, all celebration in the ghetto exists, by definition, in the face of adversity and hardship.

Bakhtin presents the undoing of the king as one side of a coin that features the countering praise of the monarch on the other side. There is no abuse without praise in Rabelais' world, claims Bakhtin (197). In many ways, this is a better analogy than the "totalitarianism" model we have been using. Conditions for ghetto citizens have not improved to the point that they have cast off the shackles of impoverished imprisonment, but rap now exists in the public sphere as an unavoidable entity, subject to much abuse and praise. Also, the music itself *is* festive and popular. It may be the music of the huddled masses, but it is coded and marketed as music for the free. By this I mean that the music attracts the attention of popular music consumers, rather than alienating them. Also, the themes of struggle and revolution are coded within the aforementioned celebratory resistance framework. Bakhtin is keenly aware of similar contradictions in the literature he studies; we may therefore apply his work to our inherently contradictory art form. As he puts it, "There is no pure abstract negation in the popular-festive system of images; it tends to embrace both poles of becoming in their contradiction and unity" (203).

Lefort's philosophy of the "People-as-One" with the ruler as the head of the body politic and social body and Bakhtin's vision of a system in which "the king is the clown" both describe the political climate in America as seen from the ghetto (Bakhtin, 197). President Bush ran his campaigns as a man of the people—although which "people" that means is certainly debatable—and no small number of his opponents, of which there are many in urban environments, consider him a "clown." The other rulers of modern

America are the economic giants, as stated earlier. Thus, the tragedy of September 11 was a double beheading in its attacks on economic and political rulers.

Although it would be a falsehood of slanderous proportions to claim that rappers were the real masterminds behind the terror of that day, it is no secret that some of them identify more with the terrorists than the victims of the attacks. Eminem, for example, has made no secret of his political stance.

Fuck money, I don't rap for dead presidents

I'd rather see the president dead

It's never been said, but I set precedents ("We As Americans," Eminem)

Indeed, since 9/11, there has been an unprecedented amount of such politically-charged raps from both mainstream artists such as Eminem, Jadakiss ("Why do niggas push pounds of powder? / Why did Bush knock down the towers?" ["Why"]), and Kanye West ("Went from bein' a broke man to bein' a dope man to bein' the President" ["Crack Music") to underground rappers like Immortal Technique, Mr. Lif, and P.O.S.

Of these artists, Immortal Technique most readily identifies with the terrorists.

They say the rebels in Iraq still fight for Saddam

But that's bullshit, I'll show you why it's totally wrong

Cuz if another country invaded the hood tonight

It'd be warfare through Harlem, and Washington Heights

I wouldn't be fightin' for Bush or White America's dream

I'd be fightin' for my people's survival and self-esteem

I wouldn't fight for racist churches from the south, my nigga

I'd be fightin' to keep the occupation out, my nigga

You ever clock someone who talk shit, or look at you wrong?

Imagine if they shot at you, and was rapin' your moms

And of course Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons

We sold him that shit, after Ronald Reagan's election

Mercenary contractors fightin' a new era

Corporate military bankin' off the war on terror

They controllin' the ghetto, with the failed attack

Tryna distract the fact that they engineerin' the crack

So I'm strapped like Lee Malvo holdin' a sniper rifle

These bullets'll touch your kids, and I don't mean like Michael

Your body be sent to the morgue, stripped down and recycled

I fire on house niggaz that support you and like you

Cuz innocent people get murdered in the struggle daily

And poor people never get shit and struggle daily

This ain't no alien conspiracy theory, this shit is real

Written on the dollar underneath the Masonic seal ("Bin Laden," Immortal

Technique)

By comparing the American-led invasion of Iraq with a hypothetical invasion of New

York City, Immortal Technique implicitly draws a comparison between the rebels'

sentiments in Iraq and in Harlem and Washington Heights. Technique simultaneously

questions the media's explanation for the insurgence in Iraq and provides his own

interpretation, in the process getting the listener to empathize with Iraqi citizens and the

residents of these two New York neighborhoods, who are presented, for better or worse,

as rough equivalents.[1] Technique also supports the rights of the insurgents with his emphasis on his "people's survival and self-esteem." He additionally indicts the United States for its role in the Middle East, suggesting that our nation brought tragedy upon itself by giving Saddam Hussein chemical weapons. Technique raps in the previous verse that the United States "funded Al-Qaeda" and that "[Osama] Bin Laden was a CIA tactician." Clearly, Technique is positioning the U.S.A. as the real terrorists, at least as defined by Ted Honderich, who writes that we can consider terrorism and political violence as one thing, which is "violence with a political and social intention, whether or not intended to put people in general in fear, and raising a question of its moral justification—either illegal violence within a society or smaller-scale violence than war between states or societies and not according to international law" (Honderich, 98-9).

The comparison between terrorists and the state sits well with Mr. Lif as well. His "Home of the Brave," an ironic title, boldly mocks the United States' response to terrorism:

Headline: Bush steals the presidency

He needs the backing of the meek what could the remedy be?

The country's headed for recession reminiscent of the Great Depression

Are lives worth a world of power? Easy question

Planes hit the towers and the Pentagon

Killing those the government wasn't dependent on

It's easy to control the scared so they keep us in fear

With their favorite Middle Eastern demon named Bin Laden this year

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[1] This reference to Harlem as a metonym for class and social division has a clear precedent in such works as Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B."

Bush disguises blood lust as patriotism

Convincing the living to love "Operation Let's Get 'Em"

But when he realized we don't support their attacks

They needed something to distract, hmm, anthrax

This further demonizes Afghanis

So Americans cheer while we kill their innocent families

And what better place to start a war

To build a pipeline to get the oil that they had wanted before

America supported the Taliban

To get Russia out of Afghanistan

That's how they got the arms in

They're in a war against the Northern Alliance

And we can't build a pipeline in hostile environments

Here's what your history books won't show:

You're a dead man for fucking with American dough

They killed several birds with one stone

While you're at home with anti-terrorism up in your dome

But my eyes are wide open and my TV is off

Great, 'cause I save on my electricity cost

And you can wave that piece of shit flag if you dare

But they killed us because we've been killing them for years ("Home of the

Brave," Mr. Lif)

Mr. Lif's rhetorical approach is not to elicit empathy by comparing Afghanis to Americans; in this verse every American in power is corrupt, bringing to mind the old adage that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Very few Americans are liberal enough to accept Mr. Lif's political claims, but that is part of what makes them so compelling. The idea that 9/11, the war on terror, and the anthrax scandal were all created by the Bush administration to justify an invasion with the ultimate goal of building an oil pipeline is outlandish (hopefully), but Lif's intense delivery, apparent conviction, and easy acceptance of our government's diabolical pragmatism make the listener *want* to believe it, if only for Lif's sake. Such leftist conviction is almost certainly alienating; not too many people are angry enough to call the signified Bloods-Crips-cops-slugs object a "piece of shit flag."

Enter P.O.S., who also raps about the flag, mistaking another rapper's call to "light that shit up," with "that shit" being marijuana, as a command to immolate the stars and stripes. His sophomore album, *Audition*, has as its first rapped lines, "First of all, fuck Bush; / That's all, that's the end of it" ("Half-Cocked Concepts," P.O.S.). He goes on to rhyme, "There's still songs about bitches from 9/11 witnesses / So here I am in the Middle West / The heartland, mo'fucker, / Sippin' whole milk, mo'fucker" ("Half-Cocked Concepts," P.O.S.) P.O.S. resides in Minnesota, but with the use of "Middle West" next to a reference to 9/11, he elicits a response that immediately recalls an instilled fear of terror in many listeners. He further plays with this association— essentially one that establishes a dominant identity through violence—in the next two

lines, rapping as though "sippin' whole milk" were the ultimate measure of masculine superiority.[2]

The creation of an image of cool through one's diet by a rapper whose name alludes to feces (even though he usually expands it out to Promise of Stress and not Piece of Shit) again reminds us of Bakhtin, whose work on what he terms "the material bodily lower stratum" is exceptional. Bakhtin notes that everything in Rabelais' world "is directed toward the underworld, both earthly and bodily" (370). This theory applies equally well to rap, which sees in all existence a tendency toward chaos and destruction. This is a necessary coping mechanism in resisting the collapse of the world around its chief creators, those residing in the ghettoes of metropolitan American cities. It would be impossible to accept such conditions with a firm belief in the ultimate goodness and equality of mankind.

At the same time, this is not hopelessness. The material bodily lower stratum is not only the seat—no pun intended—of the "Great Peristalsis" that produces "postwar art's ultimate expression . . . a kind of psychosocial excrement" (Foster Wallace & Costello, 84), it is also the home of all bodily creation, the place in which new life originates. It should come as no surprise, then, when we discover that a whole vocabulary in rap has arisen around this concept, as when Lauryn Hill says, "I'll be Nina Simone defecatin' on your microphone" on The Fugees' "Ready or Not." Again we see the multi-faceted and often contradictory nature of rap, which the music embodies through redefinition, Signifyin(g), and other rhetorical tropes. Some artists live this

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[2] As with many lines in rap, this one also makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to an earlier song. In this case, the song referenced is Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Gin and Juice," which associates a laid back lifestyle in southern California with "sippin' on gin and juice." P.O.S. knowingly appropriates this lyric to portray the frosty conditions of Minnesota, especially how these conditions exist vis-à-vis California.

nature, such as Tupac Shakur. So what will be the ultimate expression of violence as viewed through this motif?

P.O.S. offers one alternative in his landmark track, "Gimme Gimme Gunshots," which begins by boldly declaring, "I am a gun." Like in "I Gave You Power," P.O.S. creates a link between himself and a gun. However, P.O.S. does not extend the metaphor. Rather, he creates a link between destruction and effort, claiming, "Effort's like a gunshot—a split-second of manmade perfection" ("Gimme Gimme Gunshots, P.O.S.).[3] The possibilities here for violence as a redemptive act are unlimited. Using the word "perfection" conjures a divine image of creation. This split-second of perfection, which P.O.S. implies is a rare commodity, can be used to create something much greater than itself. As effort is concerned, this statement makes sense. The use of a gunshot as the vehicle, though, complicates things. The split-second of perfection must also apply to a gunshot. Ergo, the gunshot appears capable of creation as well.

This image, while stunning, does not exist simply for us to marvel at it. P.O.S. delivers two verses in the song. In the first verse, he explicitly mentions Biggie Smalls, another alias of The Notorious B.I.G. In the second verse, he claims to have "ambitions of a rider, like another famed victim of effort" ("Gimme Gimme Gunshots," P.O.S.). This refers to "Ambitionz Az A Ridah," a Tupac Shakur song. The references to these fallen heroes of hip-hop bring to mind the violence responsible for their deaths. However, within the song's rhetorical structure, this violence is actually a positive force; it is some effort from which other works have come. This is, of course, a meta-narrative

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[3] Since I will not focus as intently on the lyrics of this song as I have for earlier works, I have chosen not to include the lyrics next to the text. However, because the song is incredibly important, and informs much of my work here, I have elected to include its lyrics as a separate appendix, found immediately after the final body page of the text.

on "Gimme Gimme Gunshots" itself; a song about fallen rappers could not have been written unless they died. In addition, though, it points to an implicit argument of this thesis: rap violence has significantly changed in character since the late 1990s, and especially since 9/11, becoming a force for creative growth.

This reading functions well within the limited confines of text interpretation, but the goal is to apply it to a broader narrative. Just as rap music is really a reflection of postmodern society through a glass darkly, so too can this be used to interpret events of broader cultural significance. For example, take terrorism. Does terrorism create something redemptive and good? Honderich grants, "There is great reason to take terrorism as *prima facie* wrong" (184). Yet, when one suffers through oppression, suppressed dissent, or other forms of government tyranny and the political violence of the state, and one can succeed in bettering one's life, some means may be justified—not all means to an end, of course, but perhaps some more extreme than the average person would like to admit to himself. If certain acts of terrorism pave the way for greater proportions of humanity, with minimal cost, this creation may well be justified. Does this mean 9/11 is so? Hardly, except perhaps in the sense that it has created this very awareness of the morality of terrorism and sparked debate. Clearly, it has done so not only in the hallowed halls of academia but also in the rugged streets of the 'hood. In fact, it has not only done so, but it has also helped merge these places within a larger space wherein political violence and real violence exist simultaneously and within one another.

THINGS DONE CHANGED:

CONCLUSIONS

In the days of kings and queens, I was a jester
Treat me like a god, oh they treat me like a leper
You see me move back and forth between both
I'm trying to find a balance, I'm trying to build a balance
             "Trying to Find a Balance," Atmosphere

But to the pricks who think I'm slackin'
Please don't ever be fooled, I'm packin'
This is a welcome and it's a warning
Please don't ever just think I'm rappin'
You know the score, I'm raw from day
Still Dylan the villain from around the way
Feel free to quote anything I say
Please don't ever just think I'm chattin'
             "Respect Me," Dizzee Rascal

In essence, this essay is about changes. It is fitting, then, that both Tupac Shakur

and The Notorious B.I.G.—victims of change themselves—wrote songs with "change" in

the title: 2pac's "Changes," and B.I.G.'s "Things Done Changed." However, these songs

differ in scope: "Things Done Changed" deals with the differences between the past and

present, while "Changes" focuses on the process of improving social conditions in the

future. These interests are not that surprising: social change is a prominent topic of rap,

and a concern with time is another mark of postmodern art.[1] In the brief time that rap has

existed as an art form, it has seen drastic change. Violence and how it is expressed—in

rap and in society at large—has changed as well. Thus, there is a need for changing

interpretations of this violence, which have been slow in coming. Still, one constant in

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[1] An interesting experiment relevant to this concern with time is the group Deltron 3030, composed of
rapper Del Tha Funkee Homosapien, producer Dan "The Automator" Nakamura, and turntablist Kid Koala.
The group's self-titled concept album is set in the year 3030, and takes an intelligent and critical look at our
society, present and future.

this violence has been the effect of societal injustices on the impoverished, which will almost certainly remain a constant in the foreseeable future.

As Mayor Kilpatrick said, "We are in a position where we must either transform or die." What I love about this statement is that it can mean so many things. In the 1970s, hip-hop's pioneers, faced with a bleak future, transformed old technologies and music into a cutting-edge sound that is now the world's most popular form of music. In the 1990s, hip-hop refused to remain stagnant, and transformed itself into the "gangsta rap" familiar to most listeners. Unfortunately, the very violence this subgenre promoted took the lives of two of its greatest artists, transforming their lives, the genre, and the lives of all who listened to them. In this case, transformation and death were closely linked or even one and the same. In the current decade, critics are the ones who must transform their readings, or risk becoming irrelevant. If this occurs, it may even set in motion a chain of events that, should critics desert the genre, causes rap to lose its credibility as an art form, a horrible loss for music fans everywhere. It is truly a matter of life and death.

Violence too is a matter of life and death, as the tragic examples of Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace have shown us. Some acts are certainly senseless, while others may be justified. It may be difficult to differentiate between senseless and justifiable acts, even for those committing the acts. However, it is incorrect to group all acts of violence together under the heading of senselessness, and then denounce those who commit them, as though they themselves are not also victims of violence.

Understandably, the debate on violence in rap music and in the media in general is likely to rage for some time. The issue is charged with legal, moral, and aesthetic

biases, as is evident from my own admittedly biased reading. Still, it is too simplistic to interpret violence without attempting to come to any understanding of how it functions in the music. In this essay, therefore, I have attempted to come to my own understanding of this function, as I see it. This reading includes the impact of political and social violence on the 'hood, which I view as significant but not a simple matter of direct causation; the presentation of real as well as symbolic violence in the art, an important contribution to perspectives on the ghetto from outsiders, who must always be wary of extrapolating to a macro- level from the songs they hear; and the increased political consciousness of rap violence since the deaths of Shakur and Wallace and the tragedy of 9/11. In the upcoming years, it will be interesting to see how these varying approaches to violence play out within a society that many see as increasingly stratified. Will new art forms be created? Will the revolution be televised? What violence yet lies in store? For the question of violence is not an "if" question, but a "what" or "when" question. Rap, perhaps more than other musical forms, recognizes this fact and uses violence to present multiple viewpoints on different aspects of society. It is time for others to do the same.

Appendix

P.O.S. – "Gimme Gimme Gunshots" Lyrics
[sample]
Well, some of you might be sittin' out there tryin' not to like us
But we want you to know we good

I am a gun

[Verse 1]
Okay frustration takes a fast cat
And slows 'em down like a bullet forced through layers
of disgusting Biggie Smalls fat
Still gets the job done
But only now it takes like ten gun claps to stab the fat of just one
The effort of a bullet through a hero's cheescake armor
Doesn't make him less a hero, more a metaphor for life
My effort works in full clips
Only hero is a farmer
Cause he helps me fatten up and that's my bullet into strife, you know?
I knew this guy, hell bent on getting over
On some "Help me paint this fence" shit
"Oh my god it's fun!"
But it wasn't, I called him Huckleberry Fuckup
Cause he pulled that crap like every day and nothing ever got done
The frustrated, crumble under the weight of their own
Bubbling hate of their own brain
Effort's like a gunshot - a split-second of manmade perfection
Dial up speed and direction

So..

[Chorus 1]
Let me give a little cause to the flickering sun
Stop, drop, then gimme props, gimme gunshots
Gimme all that work, gimme ink spots
Gimme all that hurt, gimme snapshots
Lemme get a photograph and laugh under your bad news
Kill the wet words, give me effort
Let me give a little cause to the bickering
Then stop stop the sun sun from flickering
Gimme work, gimme hurt, gimme effort
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme gunshots
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme gunshots
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme guns

[Bridge]
I won't deny it, I'm a straight rider
You don't wanna fuck with DoomTree

[Verse 2]
I've got ambitions of a rider
Like another famed victim of effort
Less effort though
Well...I guess he took it and smiled
Five shots couldn't stop the knowledge dropper
Turned posh in his Tiff jar and clone donor
But fifteen could
(Maybe it was fourteen, I think)
Give me the strength to pierce flesh
The highest caliber of focus that'll give me death
The hammer pin, powder push
A simple try'll do, I won't lie to you
I'm simply trying to let that blood goosh
I'm simply trying to slip past medocrity's lips
Just wanna kill that bitch from the inside, you know what I'm sayin
The thorny Doom branch on the side of every blank loaded
Armchair thinker, and backseat liver
You perish my people like Anne Rice
You parody passion
My bullet will not think twice before bashing (I won't)
I gotta put effort into every little tiny fucking thing I do(seriously)

So..

[Chorus 2]
Let me give a little cause to the flickering sun
Stop, drop, then gimme props, gimme gunshots
Gimme all that work, gimme ink spots
Gimme all that hurt, gimme snapshots
Lemme get a photograph and laugh under your bad news
Kill the wet words, give me effort
Let me give a little cause to the bickering
Then stop stop the sun sun from flickering
Gimme work, gimme hurt, gimme effort
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme gunshots
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme gunshots

[Chorus 3]
Let me give a little cause to the flickering sun
Stop, drop, then gimme props, gimme gunshots

Gimme all that work, gimme ink spots
Gimme all that hurt, gimme snapshots
Lemme get a photograph and laugh under your bad news
Kill the wet words, give me effort
Let me give a little cause to the bickering
Then stop stop the sun sun from flickering
Gimme work, gimme hurt, gimme effort
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme gunshots
Kill the weak plots, gimme gimme g-gimme g-gimme gimme
gimme gimme guns

Bang
Pow

Gimme Gimme Gunshots: The CD

1. The Sugarhill Gang – "Rapper's Delight"
2. Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five – "The Message"
3. N.W.A. – "Fuck tha Police"
4. Nas – "N.Y. State of Mind"
5. Jay-Z – "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)"
6. Eminem – "Guilty Conscience"
7. Wu-Tang Clan – "Protect Ya Neck"
8. Wu-Tang Clan – "A Better Tomorrow"
9. Nas – "I Gave You Power"
10. 2pac – "If I Die 2nite"
11. Immortal Technique – "Bin Laden"
12. Mr. Lif – "Home of the Brave"
13. P.O.S. – "Half-Cocked Concepts"
14. P.O.S. – "Gimme Gimme Gunshots"

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