

RAPRESENTING:
THE MISCELLANEOUS MEANING OF GANGSTA RAP IN 1990s
AMERICA

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By

Inge Oosterhoff

S1474839

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Supervisor: Dr. Damian Pargas

Second reader: Dr. Adam Fairclough

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Introduction

*Approach to Danger*¹

“Rap is really funny, man. But if you don’t see that it’s funny, it will scare the shit out of you.”

– Ice-T

Gangsta rap has generated greater public controversy than any popular music genre in American history. Concern over popular music’s effect on society is not new, nor exclusively American. In the 1920s, the popularity of jazz music generated heated public debates over its corruption of America’s segregated youth. Similarly, rock and roll caused great uproar during the 1950s; as did punk music in 1970s Great Britain. In each of these cases, the new music genres incited public fear for its negative impact on youth; specifically concerning its effect on youth’s attitudes towards sex, drugs, violence, and lawlessness. Notably, America’s greatest moral panics were incited by black music genres. Moreover, public controversies over black music have historically affected the political orientation of the American public. This makes the relationship between American political history and controversy over popular black music a particularly interesting topic for research.²

Music and politics have always been intrinsically linked. Music is often used to express political identity, to voice oppression and to protest. Music that explicitly

¹ N.W.A., *Approach to Danger*, MC Ren, Dr. Dre, Eazy E., © 1991 by Ruthless/Priority Records, B00006JJ1P, Compact Disc.

² Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 21; Leola Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap: Class and Race Agendas in the Campaign Against Hardcore Rap Lyrics,” *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review* 3.25 (1994): 26; Ian Peddie, introduction to *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* (Harnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), xvii; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 5; John Springhall, *Youth Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 2, 3, 5; John Lynxwiler and David Gay, “Moral Boundaries and Deviant Music: Public Attitudes toward Heavy Metal and Rap,” *An Interdisciplinary Journal* 21 (2000), 66.; Ronald M. Radano, Preface to *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xiii.

denounces mainstream politics and values often incites public resistance. The public perception of that music as a threat to society is thus informed by the public's perception of correct politics and values. The public discussion of a musical genre that is both widely popular and feared reflects social and political schisms in the society in which that discussion takes place. Although public outcries against popular music are present in any age, the reaction to their popularity is unique to each era. In effect, a closer look into moral panics concerning specific popular music genres can provide significant new insights into the workings of a society's politics, values and tensions between the subversive and mainstream at a particular time in history.³

Gangsta rap was a product of shifting political attitudes and reforms from the 1970s to the late 1980s. After the American Civil Rights Movement simmered down, the political climate in America became increasingly neoconservative. Under the Reagan and Bush presidencies, America deindustrialized, public welfare was significantly reduced, and capitalism and individual wealth gained new importance. The political climate of the 1980s progressively disadvantaged previously industrial neighborhoods in major cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York; neighborhoods that were primarily inhabited by poor African-American and Latino communities.⁴ A combination of federal neglect and increased policing of these communities informed a complex relationship between its residents, authorities

³ Courtney Brown, *Politics in Music: Music and Political Transformation from Beethoven to Hip-Hop* (Atlanta: Farsight Press, 2008), 1; Springhall, *Youth Popular Culture and Moral Panics*, 3, 159; Houston A. Baker Jr., *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 33.

⁴ Although these neighborhoods are regularly referred to as “ghettos,” “inner-cities,” or “urban areas” in scholarly research and public debates, these words are not used in this research unless they are part of a quotation. Aforementioned terms are too often used as racialized code words and carry too many negative connotations regarding particular behavior, culture, and mentality to allow for the nonpartisan character of scholarly research. Moreover, since this research explores the influence of code words and stereotypes within public conversations, it would be counterproductive to use laden terms to describe neighborhoods and communities. Since poverty is a state that anyone can be in regardless of gender or ethnicity, and that instructs many of the characteristics of the neighborhoods discussed in this research, words such as “ghetto” or “inner-city” are replaced with words that acknowledge the severely impoverished and disadvantaged state of these neighborhoods compared to other residential areas.

and mainstream society. Gangsta rap emerged from these neighborhoods during the late 1980s, and the music lyrically and stylistically expressed a painful awareness of racial and class based disparities within American society and within the African-American community.⁵

The instant popularity of gangsta rap was accompanied by a momentous backlash, unleashing heated public debates, widely disputed trials, and anti-gangsta rap campaigns. The controversial messages and imagery of gangsta rap, combined with its widespread popularity amongst black and white youths, roused a wave of discontent amongst parents, politicians, religious leaders, racial equality groups, feminists and others. Although often regarded as a white versus black narrative, activists and groups of all racial and political backgrounds protested gangsta rap, at times uniting in their efforts. Anti-gangsta rap activists publically denounced the music, and some attempted to rid American society from gangsta rap completely. As a result of anti-gangsta rap activism, the music was censored and banned from radio stations; concerts were canceled or heavily policed; the sale of albums was criminalized; and record labels and rappers were taken to court.⁶

⁵ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 12, 13, 27; Ernest Allen, jr., "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap," in: *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 160; Jefferson Morley, introduction to *Rap: The Lyrics* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992), xxv; Loïc J.D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501(1989): 11, 15.

⁶ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G"*, 13, 27; Rachel L. Jones, "Waging War on Gangsta Rap, She Accepts Unlikely Warriors. C. Delores Tucker Teams Up With Conservative William Bennett." *The Inquirer*, July 6, 1995, accessed June 12, 2014, http://articles.philly.com/1995-07-06/living/25679533_1_black-women-national-political-congress-rappers; William Eric Perkins, "The Rap Attack: An Introduction," in: *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 18, 25; Tricia Rose, "Hidden Politics: Discursive and Institutional Policing of Rap Music," in: *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 236-237; Morley, *Rap: The Lyrics*, 239; Johnson, "Silencing Gangsta Rap," 40; William Eric Perkins, "Youth's Global Village: an Epilogue," in: *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 266.

The controversy surrounding gangsta rap has made it an enticing subject for scholarly research, and scholars have researched the musical genre from the moment it popularized. During the 1990s, scholars such as Bakari Kitwana, Tricia Rose, Robin Kelley, Michael Eric Dyson, Nelson George and Todd Boyd wrote various books and articles about gangsta rap. Some scholars, such as Eithne Quinn, Marcus Reeves and Jeff Chang, have revisited the subject more recently. However, two decades after the emergence of gangsta rap, scholars have failed to reach consensus over what gangsta rap is and how it relates to mainstream society and politics.⁷

Scholarly research of gangsta rap is generally focused on validating or refuting claims regarding the music's cultural and political value. Some scholars have attempted to counter negative public images of gangsta rap in their research, while others have attempted to verify gangsta rap's supposed harmful effect on American society and the African-American community.⁸ Sociological, cultural and historical research methods have been combined to explore gangsta rap's rootedness in poor black communities and African-American culture, as well as the effects of its large white fan base and the predominantly white-owned record industry on gangsta rap's value as an African-American cultural product. Some scholars, such as Tricia Rose and Eithne Quinn, have specifically explored the politics of gangsta rap and other rap genres. Gangsta rap's misogynist conventions are another popular topic for scholarly

⁷ See: Bakari Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap: Who Run It? Gangsta Rap and Visions of Black Violence* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Michael Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Ebury Press, 2005); Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream!: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009).

⁸ See for example; Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta' Rap* (OUP USA: New York, 1997); Benjamin P. Bowser, *Gangster Rap and Its Social Cost: Exploiting Hip Hop and Using Racial Stereotypes to Entertain America* (London: Cambria Press, 2012).

research, specifically with regard to female rappers. A significant body of research exists on lyrical interpretations of gangsta rap songs. Generally, the academic response to the public controversy over gangsta rap was to test and contest negative stereotyping of the music by approaching gangsta rap as a serious cultural and political product with deep roots in African-American history and culture.⁹

Although public reactions against gangsta rap have informed and motivated many scholars in their research, few have specifically researched activism against gangsta rap or the public dialogue that followed. Most scholars refer to anti-gangsta rap activism as proof that gangsta rap was grossly misinterpreted as dangerous and its artists unnecessarily bullied. Some scholars contrast public denunciation of the music with the profits made by white-dominated music labels that capitalized on black stereotypes. In most scholarly research, the reaction against gangsta rap is primarily used to support the notion that gangsta rap has been misunderstood as a racial and cultural product.¹⁰

More detailed research of anti-gangsta rap activism and the public discussion of gangsta rap could provide a valuable addition to existing research. A better understanding of the discourse used within the public discussion of gangsta rap could clarify the ways in which that public discussion did not only define gangsta rap, but also defined the societal position and public understanding of the demographic group that gangsta rap represented. What made gangsta rap so controversial, and what can the polemic public reception of the music tell us about American society? These

⁹ Kitwana emphasizes the political power of hiphop, but problematizes the political power of gangsta rap. Kelley, Rose, Quinn and Chang focus specifically on the relation between gangsta rap and politics. Rose additionally researches gender politics in gangsta rap. Quinn and Boyd emphasize the commercial aspect of gangsta rap in relation to its racial stereotyping.

¹⁰ For example, Tricia Rose emphasizes critics' inability to understand the true meaning and value of gangsta rap in her research, while Bakari Kitwana often criticizes the simultaneous mass consumption of gangsta rap by white Americans, as well as the profits made by corporate industry, with public dismissal of blackness.

questions can be answered by investigating the ways in which different politics and values informed America's extraordinary response to gangsta rap during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

To understand the ways in which gangsta rap challenged American society, it must first of all be understood as a product of its time. The music's construction of us and them, as well as its negation of authority and certain mainstream politics and values, were significantly informed by the relationship between economically disenfranchised neighborhoods and the rest of America. The first chapter will therefore explore the political and social context from which gangsta rap emerged, with a specific focus on South Central Los Angeles, where gangsta rap originally came from.¹¹ Moreover, this chapter will investigate the origin of the most controversial characteristics of gangsta rap, and the ways in which scholars and critics have struggled to discuss gangsta rap at the hand of those characteristics.

The second chapter will explore the dynamics of anti-gangsta rap activism. Close analysis of the most prominent anti-gangsta rap campaigns of the 1980s and '90s, and of the groups and individuals behind them, will provide new insight into the multifarious perception of the supposed dangers of gangsta rap. This chapter will investigate stereotyping within the public discussion of gangsta rap by evaluating the concepts of victim and culprit within that discussion, what about gangsta rap was believed to be unacceptable or dangerous, and what gangsta rap represented for different individuals and groups. This evaluation will demonstrate how different characteristics of gangsta rap informed different concerns and incited different types of protest.

¹¹ Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream!: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftershock of Black Power* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), 101.

The final chapter will pragmatically explore how the public discussion of gangsta rap extended into and affected conversations about certain social issues in America during the 1990s. This chapter will investigate how and to what extent the discussion of gangsta rap became related to public discussions regarding issues such as crime, police brutality, and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. This chapter will particularly explore how gangsta rap's identification with America's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, and its stereotypical image as a black and violent music, influenced the public discourse concerning the neighborhoods that gangsta rappers claimed to represent. Contributions to this discussion by rappers, politicians, the media, and others are scrutinized to explore how gangsta rap could simultaneously criticize social issues and feed into them. Moreover, this chapter includes an analysis of the ambiguous relation between fantasy and reality in both gangsta rap and American politics, and its complicating effect on gangsta rap's potential as a voice for disadvantaged communities.

This study's exploration of politics and values in the activism against and public discussion of gangsta rap in America offers new insights into the effects of moral panic over popular culture on the public's perception of society. A careful examination of individual and public views on gangsta rap allows for a more holistic understanding of both gangsta rap and the reaction against it than has thus far been constructed in existing research. Moreover, the specific focus on moral panic and public discourse adds to the sparse body of research on public fear of popular culture.¹² Scholarly debates over the value or failure of gangsta rap as a form of political protest or social counternarrative is meaningless without a proper understanding of gangsta rap's influence on the public discourse regarding the social

¹² Springhall, *Youth Popular Culture and Moral Panics*, 3.

demographic it represented. By exploring the multifaceted response to gangsta rap, this study takes steps towards constructing a more complete understanding of the complexities involved in the way music challenges society.

1

Rapresent

Roots of Gangsta Rap

Ever since its popularization in the late 1980s, gangsta rap has been described with stereotypical terms such as black, urban, misogynist, violent, and nihilistic. Scholars, critics and fans alike have used these terms and themes to explain, attack or defend the musical genre. However, it is difficult to determine what exactly is meant by ambiguous terms such as “urban,” “gangsta” and “black.” Most terms associated with gangsta rap carry great social and political clout. Moreover, ever since it popularized, scholars and the public have accused gangsta rap of glorifying drugs, lawlessness, exorbitant sexuality and anti-authoritarianism. Consequently, the assignment of stereotypical labels to gangsta rap is as simplistic as it is complex. However, labels that are commonly assigned to gangsta rap are assigned to the genre for a reason. What is the story behind gangsta rap’s most controversial characteristics, and what does the assignment of certain stereotypical labels to the genre signify? This chapter examines these questions by discussing the social, political, and physical context from which gangsta rap emerged, as well as the position that some of gangsta rap’s most controversial characteristics take within the scholarly discussion of gangsta rap.¹

*Once Upon A Time in the Projects*²

As a musical genre that popularized in the wake of “mainstream” rap, some of the labels commonly assigned to gangsta rap had already been assigned to rap music in

¹ Perkins, “The Rap Attack,” 17; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 379; Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap,” 26; Robin D.G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles,” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William E. Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 147, 148; Reeves, *Somebody Scream*, 148, 150; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 52.

² Ice Cube, *Once Upon A Time in the Projects*, © 1990 by Priority Records, B000003B6X, Compact Disc.

general. Black music scholar Tricia Rose argues that “anger, protest against social and economic conditions, racism and neglect, pride in black and local culture...were all already elements of rap music when it first appeared.” Gangsta rap reworked those elements and expressed rap’s anger, protest and pride in local and black culture with a newfound intensity that was difficult to ignore. Additionally, gangsta rap negated the more political and racially conscious messages of previous rap genres. Compared to previous rap styles, the gangsta rap genre was profoundly aggressive and offered extremely nihilistic depictions of “street life,” sex, and violence.³

Rap music, including gangsta rap, has strong roots in economically disenfranchised, neglected, and ethnically isolated communities. Rap music is generally believed to originate from the South Bronx, New York, of the 1970s. Following momentous white and middle-class flight, institutional “benign” neglect and urban-engineered isolation in the 1960s and ‘70s, a virtual island appeared on which gangs ruled the streets, unemployment was ubiquitous and authorities were unreliable. Although this situation induced crime and social instability, it also allowed for the merging of cultures and the creation of improvised entertainment. With influences from Jamaican, Puerto Rican, African-American, and other cultures, a distinct hip-hop culture developed, expressed most famously through rap music, break-dancing and graffiti art. Those areas that were dubbed “black holes of urban blight” became the centers of a new cultural product that captivated America.⁴

Compared to other rap genres, early gangsta rappers expressed a particularly strong local consciousness. Although rap music came from the South Bronx, the genre

³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 26 (quote); Perkins, “The Rap Attack,” 18,19; Denise Herd, “Changing Images of Violence in Rap Music Lyrics: 1979-1997,” *Journal of Public Health Policy* 30.4 (2009), 395.

⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, “Hip Hop 101,” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William E. Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 213; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 14, 15, 17, 107 (quote); Perkins, “The Rap Attack” 6.; Baker Jr., *Black Studies*, 90.

of gangsta rap is argued to originate from the neighborhood of Compton, Los Angeles. N.W.A., Ice Cube, Ice-T, Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg and other famous gangsta rappers used their music to voice the particular experiences and values of their community. They exhibited a strong loyalty to their neighborhood and proclaimed regularly and loudly that they came “straight outta Compton!” Early gangsta rappers saturated the genre with cultural codes, lingo and symbols that were specific to Los Angeles’ poor, young, black community. According to gangsta rap scholar Robin D. Kelley, gangsta rappers rarely shied away from discussing sensitive local issues such as “poverty, teenage pregnancy, incest, AIDS, crack cocaine, [and] alcoholism.” Rapper Eazy E explained: “We’re like reporters...We’re telling [fans] the real story of what it’s like living in places like Compton.”⁵

In many ways, the living experience in America’s most impoverished neighborhoods was unique. Some neighborhoods were extremely isolated from the rest of America, and suffered severely from the effects of poverty and institutional disinvestment. According to sociologists Loïc Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, the “urban black poor of [the late 1980s] differ[ed] both from their counterparts of earlier years and from the white poor in that they [were] becoming increasingly concentrated in dilapidated territorial enclaves that epitomize[d] acute social and economic marginalization.” This process has also been described as

⁵ Todd Boyd, “Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self: The Death of Politics in Rap Music and Popular Culture,” *Public Culture* 7.1 (Fall 1994), 293; Rose, *Black Noise*, 2, 11, 22, 59, 100; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 42, 75; Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 202; N.W.A., “Straight Outta Compton (1988),” accessed July 14, 2014, <http://rap.genius.com/Nwa-straight-outta-compton-lyrics> (first quote); Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Balistics,” 160; Eazy E., quoted in: Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), 86 (second quote).

hyperghettoization or *hypersegregation*, and led to the creation of neighborhoods with similar living conditions to those in late 1980s Compton.⁶

The economic disenfranchisement of particular city neighborhoods began with political shifts starting in the 1960s and '70s. After the tumultuous era of civil rights struggles and the Vietnam War, America struggled to redefine its national identity and values. A political and cultural backlash – resulting in significant neo-conservative reforms – rapidly intensified economic, racial and generational divides. The rise in neo-conservatism hit city neighborhoods inhabited by industrial workers the hardest. National deindustrialization and federal reforms in the 1970s gave more power to corporations, while simultaneously cutting down labor unions and worker's rights, effectively diminishing the industrial jobs that had lured minority workers to major cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Detroit. Although these reforms were not necessarily racially informed, they affected racial minorities disproportionately, and minority neighborhoods quickly transformed into economically and ethnically segregated hubs during the 1970s and '80s. Most residents faced discrimination in their search for new employment, while governments abated affirmative action. In fact, as certain neighborhoods deteriorated, companies discriminated against entire zip codes. While the national economy picked up during the late 1980s, poverty in these areas only intensified.⁷

⁶ Susan Anderson, "A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Scott and Edward V. Soja (London: University of California Press, 1998), 346; Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 42; Wacquant & Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion," 9 (quote). The term *hyperghettoization* is coined by Wacquant and Wilson in their article "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City" (1989), and the term *hypersegregation* is coined by Susan Anderson in her article "A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles" (1996).

⁷ Wacquant and Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion," 9, 24; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 32; William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 37, 40, 116.

Impoverished neighborhoods additionally underwent intense demographic changes, as many middle-class and older residents left when their neighborhoods grew poorer. A vicious cycle was set in motion, in which poverty intensified and communities rapidly became economically, socially, and ethnically segregated. Consequently, life in these hypersegregated communities became characterized by omnipresent poverty and ethnic segregation. They basically formed small islands with distinct social and political structures, which dealt with disproportionately high crime rates, a rampant drug culture, street gangs, corrupted policing and political disinvestment.⁸

*That's How I'm Livin'*⁹

Despite the fact that gangsta rap voices “street values” that are believed to be particular to certain communities, it can be problematic to ascribe deviant values and behaviors expressed in gangsta rap to the community that gangsta rappers claimed to represent. As America’s poorest neighborhoods were increasingly isolated from the rest of America during the 1970s and ‘80s, the occurrence of deviant behaviors and mentalities was regularly assigned to the character, culture, or ethnicity of their residents. While the poor became poorer and the rich became richer, it was often argued that those who struggled had only themselves to blame. This mentality was reflected in the fields of academics, media and politics. Many social and political scholars of the 1980s, fascinated by the “culture of poverty,” searched for unique feats of attitude, behavior and culture that could explain the social deterioration they

⁸ William Julius Wilson, “Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations: The Challenge of Public Agenda Research 1990 Presidential Address,” *American Sociological Review* 56.1 (1991): 9; Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2-3; Wacquant & Wilson, “The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion,” 9, 11, 15, 25; Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, xx, 46; Anderson, “A City Called Heaven,” 346.

⁹ Ice-T, *That's How I'm Livin'*, DJ Aladdin, © 1993 by EMI Records, B00FY3IJIS, Compact Disc.

observed. The media shared these scholars' fascination with the new "underclass," and saturated the term with notions of blame, disreputability, and ideology. President Reagan and Bush used this sentiment to justify further institutional disinvestment from poor neighborhoods. During the 1970s and '80s, the government made devastating cuts in social welfare and healthcare. Many politicians argued that federal assistance would only encourage the laziness and unruly behavior that led to joblessness in the first place. Moreover, stops on the allocation of revenue between the federal and city governments increased the pressure on city budgets. States and cities consequently designated less money towards public services such as education, police forces and social welfare for those areas that needed it the most. The idea that a certain mentality or culture rooted in poverty defined life in America's poorest neighborhoods, thus had highly problematic consequences.¹⁰

However, Compton and other economically disenfranchised neighborhoods did harbor lifestyles that deviated from those in America's wealthier suburbs and gated communities. Area-specific notions of violence, respect, and sexuality were lyrically and visually reproduced in gangsta rap songs and music videos. Gangsta rappers themselves argued that their musical narratives described life in their "hood." This made it tempting to overlook the complexity of the relationship between place and value in gangsta rap, and simply ascribe gangsta rapper's values and behavior to the character of their communities.¹¹

¹⁰ Wacquant & Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion," 11, 15, 24 (first quote), 25 (second quote); When Work Disappears, xx, 136; Wilson, "Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations," 4, 5; Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 44, 158; Anderson, *Streetwise*, 240, 245, 250.

¹¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 2, 11, 34; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 321; Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence and the Moral Life in the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999), 112.

*Code of the Streets*¹²

Sociologist Elijah Anderson offers a possible solution to this issue. In his interview-based study of life in America's poorest city neighborhoods, Anderson identifies a "code of behavior," which he brands the "code of the street." He supposes that this code instructs specific values and behaviors, necessary to navigate life in extremely violent communities that are unregulated by authorities. Instead of ascribing specific behavior to the character of residents, Anderson presents marked behaviors and values as part of a complex set of social rules necessary to navigate within America's poorest neighborhoods. He argues that the code influences interactions between sexes, generations, gangs, friends, family, neighbors, and between residents and authorities. Importantly, he proposes that not all residents internalize the values embedded in this code. However, he suggests that they feel obligated to obey to certain social rules in order to, often literally, survive in their neighborhoods.¹³

Anderson argues that the "code of the street" was partly constructed as response to a lack of institutionalized justice. He claims that "the code of the street emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin, resulting in a kind of 'people's law,' based on "street justice." Untrustworthy police forces, a rampant gang- and drug culture, and high rates of economic struggle and drug addiction required specific social interactions. Consequently, youths growing up in these neighborhoods were regularly exposed to violence, drugs, sex,

¹² Ice-T, *Code of the Streets*, © 2006 by Melee Records, B00B0NBREY, Compact Disc.

¹³ Anderson, introduction to *Streetwise*, x; Anderson, *Streetwise*, 6; Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 9, 10 (quote) 33, 69, 72; Robert J. Sampson and William Julius Wilson, "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality," in *Crime and Inequality*, ed. John Hagan and Ruth D. Peterson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 51. In his research, Anderson specifically focuses on the experience of African-American residents. Although this makes his research somewhat problematic and stereotyped, his research is amongst most sensible scholarly approaches life in disadvantages neighborhoods.

guns and many other issues related to extreme poverty, and they internalized much of what they saw and experienced around them.¹⁴

However, behavior that might benefit youth in their own neighborhoods was generally not accepted in the rest of society. For example, past incarceration and having children with multiple partners might ensure respect in certain neighborhoods or gangs, but it would inspire great contempt in mainstream American society. Moreover, police forces – who represented mainstream society and its ideas of acceptable behavior – punished most implementations of the “code of the street.”¹⁵

Fuck tha Police¹⁶

The severe policing of – primarily black – youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods fostered an already long-standing tension between the police and poor neighborhoods’ residents. With the rise of America’s wars on gangs and drugs during the late 1980s, tensions between police and residents of impoverished neighborhoods rapidly intensified. Some African Americans believed that police misconduct was part of a tactical eradication of young black men. At the funeral of a young victim of police brutality, minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam said, “drug dealers on the corner and they let it happen...The moment someone puts on a suit and bow tie to clean up the problem, here the police come to shoot them dead.”¹⁷

It is unsurprising that anti-police sentiments dominated a musical style emergent from Compton. According to criminologist Paul Chevingy, police misconduct

¹⁴ Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 10 (quote), 75; Anderson, *Streetwise*, 3; Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 72; Sampson and Wilson, “Toward a Theory of Race, Crime, and Urban Inequality,” 51.

¹⁵ Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 73, 108; Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 47, 149, 150, 262, 321.

¹⁶ N.W.A., *Fuck Tha Police*, Ice Cube, Mc Ren, © 1988 by Ruthless, Priority, EMI Records. B000092BRH. Compact Disc.

¹⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 106, 120; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 46; Louis Farrakhan, quoted in: Louis Sahagun, “2,000 Attend Services for Man Killed by Deputy,” *The Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1990, accessed September 15, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1990-01-28/local/me-1216_1_attend-services-for-man (quote).

occurred in all major American cities, but the relationship between the police and minority communities was especially tense in Los Angeles' poor neighborhoods. Los Angeles' LAPD had a long history of police brutality, which often appeared to be racially informed. For example, the department was known for its excessive use of firearms, tasers, and chokeholds on ethnic minorities. Moreover, the LAPD used violent preliminary intimidation more than it policed actual crimes, leaving a large record of innocent victims and deaths, most of whom were of ethnic minorities.¹⁸

The LAPD consistently swept police misconduct under the rug. A “code of silence” amongst police officers, a generally racist mentality shared by many LAPD officers and the virtual impossibility for residents to successfully file complaints allowed for structural misconduct to continue. The department itself explicitly denied the existence of racially informed police brutality. For example, chief officer Daryl Gates dismissed public controversy over multiple chokehold-related deaths of African Americans in 1982 with an explanation that black men had a particularly sensitive venous reaction to choke holds, shifting any blame for these deaths onto the natural build of African Americans.¹⁹

During the 1980s, as drug- and gang related crime rose in poor neighborhoods, American police forces rapidly militarized, increasing tensions between police and residents. Police departments adopted army artillery, armory and techniques to use in residential neighborhoods. The LAPD was no exception, and as the department militarized, it effectively opened a war on the residents of L.A.'s poor districts. Crackdowns such as “Operation HAMMER” in 1987 saw an unprecedented number of around 1500 black youths arrested, violently harassed, and entered into criminal databases. Multiple military-style raids left countless innocent victims and many

¹⁸ Paul Chevigny, *Edge of the Knife: Police Violence in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 9, 32; Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 456.

¹⁹ Chevigny, *Edge of the Knife*, 24, 50, 52; Scott and Soja, *The City*, 272.

without homes. Jimmy Carter of the Los Angeles SWAT team explained: “We want the message to get out that we’re going to come and get them.” The chief of the DA’s Hardcore Drug Unit put it quite literally when he said “This is Vietnam here.” The mayor added to the war metaphor by referring to African-American gangs as “the Viet Cong abroad in our society.”²⁰

The contempt for police forces that is expressed in many gangsta rap songs was thus rooted in a very real frustration that existed with the Compton and South Central community. Moreover, according to scholars Jeanita Richardson and Kim Scott, gangsta rap reiterated a history of anti-authority sentiments that had already been a central theme in the first rap music coming from the South Bronx and that extended beyond heavy policing. They argue that, “a sense of powerlessness to change conditions grounded in complex social, political, and economic issues led artists to seek ways to express their discontent.”²¹

Me Against the World²²

Gangsta rappers’ frustration with police forces was accompanied by their frustration with other American authorities. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, federal disinvestment had left impoverished communities socially and economically paralyzed. Low wage service jobs that had once been available quickly disappeared, investment in education dried up, youth programs were cut, healthcare and financial assistance became more difficult to acquire, and supermarkets disappeared, only to be

²⁰ Scott and Soja, *The City*, 352; Chevigny, *Edge of the Knife*, 9; Davis, *City of Quartz*, 268, 310; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 322; Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 123, 138; Jimmy Carter, quoted in: Davis, *City of Quartz*, 268 (first quote); Chief DAH DU quoted in: Davis, *City of Quartz*, 268 (second quote); Mayor Bradley, quoted in: Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (New York: Verso, 1994), 207 (third quote).

²¹ Jeanita Richardson and Kim Scott, “Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America’s Culture of Violence in Context,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 71.3 (2002): 175-176 (quote).

²² Tupac, *Me Against the World*, Dramacydal, © 1995 by Interscope Records, B000005Z0K, Compact Disc.

replaced by liquor stores. Impoverished neighborhoods also deteriorated visually, as streets grew filthy without city cleaning services, and as billboards for alcohol and cigarettes decorated prison-like housing projects.²³

As time progressed, it became increasingly difficult for minority residents of poor neighborhoods to escape their surroundings. The economy of the late 1980s created more high-wage jobs, but also required more trained workers. Since education and good jobs were scarcely if at all available to residents of economically disenfranchised neighborhoods, they could rarely profit from this development. Subliminal racism excluded many young black men and women from employment, even in the low-wage service industry that did not appeal to white and higher educated workers. Work within the immediate area often went to cheap immigrants. If better jobs were available, they commonly required long commutes to the suburbs, for which most residents did not have the means.²⁴

For many, the rampant drug culture, which dominates most gangsta rap narratives, offered a solution to economic deprivation. Drugs had always had a strong presence in poor neighborhoods, but after the introduction of the cheap and highly addictive drug crack cocaine in the 1980s, the drug problem spiraled out of control. When local gangs became involved in the drug trade, the drug economy became an integral part of life in America's poorest neighborhoods, including Compton. For many poor minority youths, the underground economy created opportunities to achieve wealth and social standing that they were unlikely to achieve in mainstream society.²⁵

²³ Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 130, 136; Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* 339, 340; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 105; Anderson, *Streetwise*, 240, 245, 250.

²⁴ Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, xvi, 37, 40, 116; Scott and Soja, *The City*, 325; Anderson, *Streetwise*, 24; Davis, *City of Quartz*, 305.

²⁵ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 53, 54, 55; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 95; Anderson, *Streetwise*, 4, 243; Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 111, 113, 120; Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 9-10, 22, 59.

*Gz and Hustlas*²⁶

Both drug and gang cultures were tightly woven into the fabric of gangsta rap. The name of the genre itself suggests strong connections to gang culture, although gangsta rappers themselves often referred to their music as “reality rap.” In fact, gangs were often part of gangsta rappers’ reality, as many of them had been part of gangs and the drug economy. Some were encouraged by fellow gang members to rap about their experiences. Moreover, gang and prison mentality saturated many gangsta rap lyrics, including rules of the underground drug trade, battles over turf, importance of locality, and violent retribution. According to gangsta rapper Ice-T, “50 percent of your crew is made up of homeboys who just got out of jail. That thug element is always ready to reach out and touch you.”²⁷

America’s war on gangs and war on drugs, which had intensified since the 1970s, had contributed to the dominance of prison mentality in gangsta rap. During the late 1980s, California built over twenty prisons in order to cope with the almost 300% increase in convicts. Excessive mandatory sentencing put many young black and Latino men behind bars for extensive periods of time, feeding into a so-called “prison-industrial complex.” Since so many young, male residents of America’s poor neighborhoods were incarcerated, prison became an integral part of their lives. Famous gangsta rapper Snoop Dogg explained, “It’s a vicious cycle, a revolving door, and after a while the line between being *in* and *out* gets real blurry and all you know for sure is that you’re serving time, one way or the other.” Rapper Coolio added, “In

²⁶ Snoop Doggy Dogg, *Gz and Hustlas*, © 1993, 2001 by Death Row Koch, B00005AQF7, Compact Disc.

²⁷ Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap,” 25, 26; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 46, 55, 182, 187; Murray Foreman, “‘Represent’: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music,” *Popular Music* 19.1 (2000): 78; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 320; Ice-T, quoted in Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 233 (quote). The genre was named gangsta rap after the first major hit by gangsta rap group N.W.A.: “gangsta gangsta.” The name has been contested by many gangsta rappers, who claimed that the genre should be named “reality rap.”

my hood, they locking everybody up. I mean it's police everywhere. They just built a new jail in my hood. It's a penitentiary culture."²⁸

*It's A Man's World*²⁹

Many scholars and critics struggle to explain the origin and meaning of gangsta rap's misogynistic sentiment; one of its most controversial characteristics. Elijah Anderson argues that divisions of power and respect inform specific gender relations in poor black communities. He describes the interaction between men and women as a type of game where power is at stake; somebody always has to lose. By publicly breaking women down, men assert "who's boss." Anderson argues that by verbally "slamming" women, men – including gangsta rappers – reassert or restore their masculine power and assure respect. Moreover, the better their verbal skills, the more respect they receive.³⁰

According to Tricia Rose, misogyny in gangsta rap stems from black men's fear of female sexuality. She argues that violent gangsta rap lyrics are particularly hostile towards police and women, because they have the power to dominate black men. She seems to agree with Anderson when she argues that "sexual dialogues in rap involve intense power struggles over the meaning, terms, and conditions of male/female relationships." Anderson suggests that in impoverished communities, where marriage rarely structures these relationships and men often struggle to provide for their families, masculinity is commonly asserted through sexual conquest and dominance over women. These values are subsequently asserted through rap and gangsta rap.

²⁸ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 46; Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 391; Snoop Dogg, *Tha Doggfather: The Times, Trials, And Hardcore Truths of Snoop Dogg* (William Morrow: New York, 1999), 84 (first quote); Coolio quoted in Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 47 (second quote).

²⁹ Ice Cube, *It's A Man's World*, Yo-Yo, © 1990 by Priority Records, B000003B6X, Compact Disc.

³⁰ Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 151, 154-155 (quote).

However, both Tricia Rose and Eithne Quinn argue that extreme valorization of sex results in a paradox of power wherein men are simultaneously powerful and vulnerable: sex is something men need women for, and that women can deny them.³¹

Black Music scholar Robin D. Kelley takes a similar approach, and argues that gangsta rap's misogyny can be explained by exploring "hidden injuries of class" and loss of patriarchal structures in impoverished black communities. He adds, however, that such an approach excuses verbal misogyny, and ignores the ways in which verbal attacks on women, as well as lyrical depictions of violence against them, ultimately serves to "justify" aggression against women. Although he does not disclose a conclusive motivation behind gangsta rap's misogyny, he does argue that the use of words such as "bitch," "ho" and "skeezer" reasserts the masculine power of gangsta rappers in possibly dangerous ways.³²

Notably, Kelley links gangsta rap's most controversial values to its African American roots. He argues that "misogyny and homophobia, though always present to some degree in African American life, became principal vehicles in the formation of youthful black male identity [during the late 1980s]." He additionally argues that derogative words such as "bitch" have been in regular use within African-American circles for decades. He quotes the word index of folklorist Roger Abrahams, who in his research of Philadelphian oral traditions during the 1950s, defined the word "bitch" as "any woman, ... usually without pejorative connotations."³³

*It Ain't Easy*³⁴

³¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 148, 150-151, 170 (quote), 173; Quinn, *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang*, 102.

³² Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 143 (quote).

³³ Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 140, 163 (quote).

³⁴ Tupac, *It Ain't Easy*, © 1995 by Interscope Records, B000005Z0K, Compact Disc.

The label of blackness is one of the most controversial and complex labels commonly assigned to gangsta rap. As Jeff Chang accurately points out in his historiography of hip-hop culture, despite its reputation as inherently African American, rap music and hip-hop did not draw solely from African-American culture, but from the many different cultures present in the South Bronx during the 1970s. Moreover, since the popularization of rap music, artists from many different national and ethnic backgrounds have produced rap music. However, most famous rappers are of African-American descent, and they have commented on the black American experience through their music since the creation of rap music. Consequently, rap became popularly known as a black musical style in the years between the emergence of rap music and the emergence of the gangsta rap genre.³⁵

This “black” label has guided multiple scholars in their approach to gangsta rap. Various scholars have traced gangsta rap’s roots back to ancient African-American traditions. For example, Eithne Quinn devotes two chapters of her book *Nuthin’ but a G-Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* to early gangsta rap’s renditions of the revenge fantasies by traditional baaad men figures Stagolee and Dolomite, to trickster figures, and to “Mack” the pimp. Robin Kelley likewise references baaad men and pimp figures in his exploration of gangsta rap’s politics and culture. Bakiri Kitwana, Marcus Reeves, William E. Perkins and others have explained gangsta rap’s braggadocio, revenge fantasies and unique narrative styles by connecting them to African-American lingual traditions such as “signifying,” “the dozens” and “toasting.” Professor Henry Louis Gates even referred to gangsta rap’s rootedness in ancient African-American culture in defense of the music’s legitimacy

³⁵ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 107; Jannis Androutsopoulos & Arno Scholz, “Spaghetti Funk: Appropriations of Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music in Europe,” *Popular Music and Society* 26.4 (2003): 463; Boyd, “Check Yo Self,” 292; 18.

as a cultural product, during a trial in which rap group 2 Live Crew's music was accused of being "obscene."³⁶

Although justifiable, explaining or defending gangsta rap by referring to its roots in African-American culture can be problematic. For example, it raises the question whether "negative" aspects of gangsta rap such as misogyny and glorification of violence should also be interpreted as traditionally African American, or whether historical roots in African-American culture justify gangsta rap's celebration of rape, murder and drug use. In the midst of heated public debates on the supposed dangers of gangsta rap, most black music scholars and critics struggled to answer such questions. Some scholars carefully selected which parts of gangsta rap they did or did not interpret as traditionally black. This allowed them to circumvented attributing gangsta rap's more controversial aspects to its African-American background. For example, Bakari Kitwana distinguishes between what he names the "sex-violence" genre and other forms of rap. His reasoning is that the label "gangsta rap" is too often loosely applied, consequently ascribing its negative aspects to other rap genres. Moreover, he chastises gangsta rap's "sex-violence" lyrics for counteracting its potential as a progressive political tool. He argues that, "although sometimes politically informed,

³⁶ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 92, 96, 99, 101, 141; Carole Boyce Davies (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, (ABC-CLIO, Inc.: Santa Barbara, 2008), 789; Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 34; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 149; Nancy Guevara, "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin'," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, ed. William E. Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1996), 50; Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 142. Perkins, "The Rap Attack," 18; Sara Rimer, "Obscenity or Art? Trial on Rap Lyrics Opens," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1990, accessed September 18, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/17/us/obscenity-or-art-trial-on-rap-lyrics-opens.html> (quote). Baaad man toasts are playful revenge stories performed as colorful characters named Stagolee and Dolomite, in which overt aggression and wordplay are meant to impress and intimidate. For more on this topic see: Peretti, Burton W. *Lift Every Voice: The History of African American Music*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009., or Abrahams, Roger. *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. New York: Random House, Inc. 1985.

gangsta lyrics tend to use racism as an excuse for not moving beyond problem-recognition to enlightened action.”³⁷

Other scholars have blamed gangsta rap’s negative aspects on white American culture. For example, in a critical essay on gangsta rap, African-American writer and social activist Bell Hooks suggested that:

Gangsta rap...is expressive of the cultural crossing, mixing and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes and concerns of the white majority...The sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and believing that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.³⁸

Thus, despite a general consensus that gangsta rap has roots in African-American culture, the implications of assigning the label “black” to the genre is contested, even amongst scholars.

Real Niggaz³⁹

Gangsta rappers themselves offered up complex notions of race.⁴⁰ Despite their strong racial identification, they regularly distanced themselves from middle and upper class African Americans. According to musicologist Craig Werner, connections that had previously been built on racial similarities were complicated by increased dissimilarities in wealth and status within the African-American community. He

³⁷ Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 33 (first quote), 34 (second quote), 35, 38.

³⁸ Bell Hooks, “Sexism and Misogyny: Who Takes the Rap? Misogyny, Gangsta Rap, and The Piano,” posted on *Race & Ethnicity*, Arthur R. McGee, March 9, 1994, accessed August 23, 2014, <http://race.eserver.org/misogyny.html> (quote).

³⁹ N.W.A., *Real Niggaz*, MC Ren, Dr. Dre, Eazy E., © 1991 by Ruthless/Priority Records, B00006JJ1P, Compact Disc.

⁴⁰ Although historically understood as a hierarchical marker of physical and mental difference, race is a social construction that is incredibly pliable, especially in the context of identification.

argues that wealth had always been distributed disproportionately within the African-American community, but this disproportion increased during the 1980s and '90s. Consequently, racial similarity was trumped by economic dissimilarity, complicating the notion of blackness within gangsta rap.⁴¹

Gangsta rappers expressed their racial identification in different ways. According to Robin D. Kelley, some used the word “nigga” to distinguish between what they defined as “real” and “fake” black men. Gangsta rappers also regularly referred to wealthy and politically influential African Americans as the black “bourgeoisie,” in this case used as a derogative term. Wrapped up in this was the idea that African Americans from outside impoverished communities did not care about the plight of poorer blacks. Ice-T explained in an interview, “I don’t think the negative propaganda about rap comes from the true black community – it comes from the bourgeois black community, which I hate. Those are the blacks who have an attitude that because I wear a hat and a gold chain, I’m a nigger and they’re better than me.” Expressing a similar sentiment, Ice Cube argued during a conversation with Angela Davis:

We’re at a point where I hear people like Darryl Gates saying, ‘We’ve got to have a war on gangs.’ And I see a lot of black parents clapping and saying: ‘Oh yes, we have to have a war on gangs.’ But when young men with baseball caps and T-shirts are considered gangs, what you doing is clapping for a war against your children.”⁴²

Gangsta rappers represented a black generation that felt cheated by the failure of the progressive black movements of the 1960s and '70s to provide a brighter future for

⁴¹ Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 45; Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 313.

⁴² Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 136; Ice-T quoted in: Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 138 (first quote); Ice Cube and Angela Davis, “Nappy Happy,” *Transition* 58 (1992): 177 (second quote).

their offspring. According to Robin D. Kelley, “by linking their identity to the hood instead of simply to skin color, gangsta rappers acknowledge the limitations of racial politics – black middle-class reformism as well as black nationalism.” Although race was important in gangsta rap, the experiences of living in America’s poorest neighborhoods as a racial minority trumped the experience of being black in America.⁴³

However, gangsta rap’s local identification was still significantly influenced by ethnicity. Many different ethnic minorities inhabited impoverished neighborhoods, and under tense living circumstances, disparities between ethnicities easily intensified. These disparities were voiced in some gangsta rap songs, which could sometimes feed into already existing tensions. For example, Ice Cube wrote the song “Black Korea” after the murder of an African-American girl by a Korean-American convenience store owner in 1991. The song’s depiction of violence against Korean-American store owners led to the Korean-American Grocers’ Association’s boycott of St. Ides, a liquor brand for which Ice Cube was the ambassador. The ban was lifted after Ice Cube publically apologized.⁴⁴

The Nigga Ya Love to Hate⁴⁵

Despite gangsta rap’s reputation as inherently deviant, gangsta rappers embraced many “mainstream” and conservative values. According to Tricia Rose, rap and gangsta rap should not be defined as solely antagonistic. She names patriarchy and homophobia as aspects that affirm rather than counteract dominant American values. Eithne Quinn similarly argues that gangsta rappers proclaimed both “conservative and

⁴³ Wacquant & Wilson, “The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion,” 9; Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 136 (quote), 139.

⁴⁴ Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 79; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 347, 351, 352.

⁴⁵ Ice Cube, *The Nigga Ya Love to Hate*, © 1990 by Priority Records, B000003B6X, Compact Disc.

progressive values.” Individuality, materialism, wealth, masculinity – they were all renditions of the American dream reworked into a “gangsta’s paradise.”⁴⁶

Moreover, many issues highlighted in attacks on gangsta rap were not confined to America’s poor neighborhoods. According to Jeanita Richardson and Kim Scott, gangsta rap was merely one of the many cultural renditions of America’s “culture of violence.” Bakari Kitwana similarly argues that America has a long history of violence and gun homicides that precedes gangsta rap. During the early 1990s, American popular culture was saturated with movies glorifying violence and vilifying police. The neoconservative backlash of the 1980s had tempered feminist and progressive ideals nationwide, and masculinity, violence, and anti-establishment all had strong holds on American culture. Nuclear families were disappearing all over America, as divorce rates soared nationally, across ethnic lines. Nevertheless, these issues were popularly seen as integral only to America’s most economically disenfranchised neighborhoods and their minority residents.⁴⁷

Gangsta rap in itself was essentially an answer to America’s incapacitation of certain neighborhoods. Gangsta rappers turned those characteristics and images that had previously only been used to justify neglect of poor neighborhoods by politicians and the media into monetary revenue. Gangsta rappers were able to capitalize on exactly those exoticized stereotypes that had made them America’s outcasts. At the same time, they changed the meaning of those stereotypes by turning them into positive signifiers. As Robin D. Kelley phrases it: “criminal acts turned into brilliant

⁴⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 103, 104; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 46 (first quote), 155 (second quote); Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 102.

⁴⁷ Richardson & Scott, “Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny,” 175 (quote); Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 42, 47, 48; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 395; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 103; Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 142; Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 87, 105.

capers and a way to *avoid* work; white fear of black male violence be[came] evidence of black power; fearlessness [was] treated as measure of masculinity.”⁴⁸

These, and many other paradoxes of gangsta rap make it difficult to accurately define or analyze the musical genre. Gangsta rap critiqued but also internalized many complex issues regarding race, class, gender, power structures, politics and responsibility. It gave a public voice to a demographic group that had long been silenced within American society, and at the same time embraced and exaggerated many existing negative stereotypes of that demographic group. Women were both loved and loathed, and their power both acknowledged and disputed. Derogatory terms could be used as positive and negative in the same song. Moreover, gangsta rap’s progressive message was intertwined with some very backward and conservative notions of gender relations and masculinity.⁴⁹

The paradoxical nature of gangsta rap allows for many different interpretations of the music and its message. This is exemplified by the variety in scholarly treatment of the music. Moreover, gangsta rap’s paradoxicality instructed America’s varied reception of gangsta rap. As gangsta rap moved from Compton’s streets into mainstream consciousness, its almost immediate popularity was accompanied by a powerful backlash. A heated public debate followed, in which questions of what exactly gangsta rap was and how it affected American society received many different answers. In this debate, gangsta rap’s most controversial characteristics, such as its misogyny, racial identification, and its glorification of violence and drugs, raised different concerns with different groups and individuals. Some of them were

⁴⁸ Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 43, 53, 54, 55; Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 140 (quote).

⁴⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 103, 104; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 15, 102; Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 317; Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 26.

concerned enough to suggest that gangsta rap posed a very real threat to society, and set up large scale anti-gangsta rap campaigns.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Johnson, "Silencing Gangsta Rap," 26.

Panic Zone¹***The Dangers of Gangsta Rap***

In a 1992 interview with music magazine *Rolling Stone*, gangsta rapper Ice-T proclaimed:

When rap came out of L.A., what you heard initially was my voice yelling about South Central. People thought, 'That shit's crazy,' and ignored it. Then NWA came and yelled, Ice Cube yelled about it. People said, 'Oh, that's just kids making a buck.' They didn't realize how many niggas with attitude are out on the street. Now you see them.²

At the time of the interview, gangsta rap had already found its way into mainstream American consciousness. Since the release of N.W.A.'s 1988 hit song "Fuck the Police," the original gangsta rap group was joined by a legion of new, and equally vocal, gangsta rap acts. America could no longer ignore these "niggas with attitudes" blaring from car radios, and glancing from TVs, movie-screens and nationwide advertisements.³

During the late 1980s and early 1990s various groups and individuals responded to gangsta rap's growing popularity by speaking out about its supposed dangers. Worried parents, liberal and conservative politicians, African-American nationalist

¹ N.W.A., *Panic Zone*, Krazy Dee, Dr. Dre, Arabian Prince, © 1989 by Priority Records, B000003B6U, Compact Disc.

² Ice-T, quoted in: Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 118 (quote).

³ Mary Rizzo, "'For Us, By Us': Hip-Hop Fashion, Commodity Blackness and the Culture of Emulation," in *Testimonial Advertising in the American Marketplace: Emulation, Identity, Community*, ed. Marlis Schweitzer & Marina Moskowitz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 211; Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 351; Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 9; Johnson, "Silencing Gangsta Rap," 35; Perkins, "The Rap Attack," 17. Gangsta rappers were regularly used as celebrity endorsers for products such as fashion brands, magazines and liquor. Ice Cube was the primary endorser for *St. Ides* malt liquor.

groups, feminists, religious leaders – they all found reasons to dislike gangsta rap enough to try and silence the music and the artists. Together they initiated the most extensive music censorship campaign in American history.⁴

Although gangsta rap was often lumped together with other forms of rap music in anti-gangsta rap campaigns, it was the extreme characteristics of gangsta rap that were at the center of protests and censorship drives. Within their campaigns, gangsta rap's adversaries all seemed to pick and choose which characteristics of gangsta rap were reprehensible. In what ways did people's understanding of gangsta rap and its supposed dangers differ, and what tactics did anti-gangsta rap campaigners use with which goals in mind? To answer these questions, this chapter analyzes some of the most prominent anti-gangsta rap campaigns and protests of the 1980s and 1990s, and explores some major intricacies within the anti-gangsta rap discussion.⁵

Skandalouz⁶

Censorship drives against certain “scandalous” types of music and entertainment had existed in America long before gangsta rap ever became popular. Around the time that gangsta rap emerged, the cultural warfare that had flared up during the 1980s had already ushered a revival of campaigns against popular culture. A combined surge in neo-conservatism and hardcore music fueled a nationwide moral panic regarding the effects of “violent media” on young Americans, resulting in a witch-hunt on supposedly dangerous music genres.⁷

⁴ Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 138; Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap,” 26.

⁵ Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap,” 26.

⁶ Tupac, *Skandalouz*, © 1995, 2005 by Koch Records, B00005AQE8, 2 Compact Discs.

⁷ Mathieu Deflem, “Rap, Rock, and Censorship: Popular Culture and the Technologies of Justice” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Law and Society Association, Chicago, May 27-30, 1993, 1; Jeffrey Ogbar, “Slouching Toward Bork: The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 30.2 (1999): 165; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 87; Herd, “Changing Images of Violence,” 395 (quote).

Heavy metal and rap music in particular came under fire for their explicit descriptions of violence, sexuality, and, in the case of heavy metal, Satanism. However, the fear of gangsta rap overlapped with an already existing national fear of black youth, which affected anti-gangsta rap campaigns specifically. According to Bakari Kitwana, the synonymy between blackness and criminality in American society made gangsta rap an “all-too-easy target.”⁸

This did not mean that gangsta rap was solely attacked by white society. As Black Studies scholar Jeffrey Ogbar explains, “The discourse surrounding hip-hop music is much too dynamic and complex to...be reduced to debates over black cultural expression and white fears of cultural invasion.” In fact, groups and individuals with many different backgrounds initiated campaigns, court cases, boycotts, public protests, angry letters, and public speeches against gangsta rap. According to Media and Cultural Studies scholar Leola Johnson, the “race and class considerations” of anti-gangsta rap activists guided them in their individual goals and tactics. Consequently, police departments, feminists, white conservative and liberal politicians, and black political and religious leaders all focused on different evils in their attacks on gangsta rap. For example, police departments completely overlooked gangsta rap’s misogyny in their campaigns, and misogyny did not become a major focus until black feminists joined the ranks. Yet, every group saw gangsta rap – or rap in general – as a sincere threat to what they valued.⁹

Parental Discretion Iz Advised¹⁰

⁸ Perkins, “The Rap Attack,” 17; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 393; Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 36 (quote).

⁹ Ogbar, “Slouching Toward Bork,” 166 (quote); Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap,” 27 (quote), 37; Richardson and Scott, “Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny,” 176.

¹⁰ N.W.A, *Parental Discretion Iz Advised*, Ice Cube, MC Ren, The D.O.C. © 1988 by Ruthless, Priority, EMI Records, B000092BRH, Compact Disc.

The wife of Tennessee's then-Senator Albert Gore, Tipper, was the first to officially take up arms against rap music. In 1985, she founded the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) with the help of several other concerned politicians' wives. After hearing her daughter listen to the song "Darling Nikki" by Prince, which contained a reference to masturbation, Tipper Gore devoted herself to educating America about the negative influence of popular song lyrics on the moral standing of America's youth, and to persecuting those who were responsible.¹¹

The PMRC sent out hundreds of letters to parents, asking for ideological and financial support, and the group was involved in several court cases against artists and record labels. The group ferociously lobbied for a lyric-rating system, for printing controversial lyrics on album covers, and for certain albums not to be displayed in record stores. Similar to earlier anti-popular culture campaigns, the PMRC focused their campaign on music's effects on youth and morality. Founding member Susan Baker stated during a congressional hearing on "Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records" in 1985, "The Parents Music Resource Center was organized...by the mothers of young children who are very concerned by the growing trend in music toward lyrics that are sexually explicit, excessively violent, or glorify the use of drugs and alcohol. Our primary purpose is to educate and inform parents about this alarming trend as well as to ask the industry to exercise self-restraint."¹²

The PMRC's ideas of what was righteous, moral behavior was significantly informed by Christianity. Religious groups have participated in campaigns against music throughout history, and the Christian Right joined the PMRC in their battles

¹¹ Deflem, "Rap, Rock, and Censorship," 1, 2.

¹² Deflem, "Rap, Rock, and Censorship," 2, 3; Richardson and Scott, "Rap Music and its Violent Progeny," 176; Lynxwiler and Gay, "Moral Boundaries and Deviant Music," 66-67; Susan Baker, "Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation United States Senate: First Session on Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records," last updated 22 July 2006, 11. Accessed September 19, 1985, <http://www.joesapt.net/superlink/shrg99-529/p11.html> (quote).

against rap and heavy metal. During an appearance on the Oprah show in 1986, Tipper Gore assured a concerned, self-appointed Christian mother that they were on her side, and that “the point is that the consumer ought to have information to base their decisions on their own values, in order to raise their children the *American* way.” Tipper Gore even wrote a book titled *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* in 1987, which, according to *The New York Times*, was published by “a religious publishing house.” The PMRC initially set its sights on heavy metal because of its supposed anti-Christian propaganda, but it eventually shifted its attention to rap music.¹³

*AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*¹⁴

The strong racial connotation of rap and gangsta rap distinguishes the crusades against it from simultaneous attacks on heavy metal, which was considered a white musical genre. Amy Binder's examination of media depiction and framing of crusades against heavy metal and rap helps to explain this difference. Binder argues that both heavy metal and rap music were considered “harmful” to young listeners, but whereas heavy metal was seen as potentially harmful to individual listeners, rap music was considered a danger to American society as a whole.¹⁵

Heavy metal was generally believed to encourage white, middle-class youths to commit suicide. Although some believed that individuals might vent their anger by going on mass-killing sprees, this remained a “one-in-a-million” type fear. In contrast, rap's core audience was not depicted as victims, but as aggressors. American media

¹³ Lynxwiler and Gay, “Moral Boundaries and Deviant Music,” 69, 73; Janie Jones, “jello biafra and tipper gore on oprah 1986 part 2 of 4.flv,” *YouTube* Video, 10:01. November 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZmDkn-VVuQ>, (5:28) (first quote); Amy Binder, “Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal and Rap Music,” *American Sociological Review* 58.6 (1993): 753, 757; “Tipper Gore Widens War on Rock,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 1988, 1. <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/04/arts/tipper-gore-widens-war-on-rock.html?pagewanted=print> (second quote).

¹⁴ Ice Cube, *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, © 1990 by Priority Records, B000003B6X, Compact Disc.

¹⁵ Tricia Rose, “Fear of a Black Planet: Rap Music and Black Cultural politics in the 1990s,” *Journal of Negro Education* 60.3 (1991), 279; Binder, “Constructing Racial Rhetoric,” 762.

outlets suggested that rap music would encourage already dangerous black youth to collectively terrorize, sexually assault, and violate innocent Americans. Even though both heavy metal and gangsta rap were challenged on the grounds of their lyrical misogyny, violence and anger, their effects on society were feared for different reasons.¹⁶

Because rap was believed to pose a specific threat to society, the music was also challenged in specific ways. For example, African-American musicians were subjected to censorship-requests and taken to trial far more often than heavy metal artists. Music artists, record storeowners and record companies were taken to court for producing and promoting dangerous filth.¹⁷ The aim of these trials was usually to ban gangsta rap from record stores, radio, television, or society as a whole.

2 Live Blues¹⁸

One of the most widely publicized trials against gangsta rap was that involving the album *As Nasty as they Wanna Be* by Miami rap group 2 Live Crew in 1990. The trial was requested by anti-pornography lawyer Jack Thompson, who argued that the album corrupted American youth's morality. Police officers, lawyers, Christian fundamentalist groups, and several Florida politicians jumped on Thompson's bandwagon. They urged federal and local administrations to support a boycott of the rap act and to ban the album from record stores. In June 1990, 2 Live Crew was officially charged with "obscenity." However, the judge could not prove that the album met all the points of the Miller test of obscenity needed to officially rule the album a danger to society because of its supposed "obscenity." Because of this, the

¹⁶ Binder, "Constructing Racial Rhetoric," 760, 762-763; Jason Talerman, "The Death of Tupac: Will Gangsta Rap Kill the First Amendment?" *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 14.1 (1994): 121, 139 (quote).

¹⁷ Talerman, "The Death of Tupac," 121; Johnson, "Silencing Gangsta Rap," 26.

¹⁸ 2 Live Crew, *2 Live Blues*, © 1989, 1996 by Lil Joe Records, B000000QQP, Compact Disc.

judge's order for the album's removal from Florida record stores was eventually revoked.¹⁹

However, fears that 2 Live Crew's music would corrupt American youth did not disappear. In cities and districts in Florida, the Midwest, and several other areas, officers requested the removal of 2 Live Crew's albums from record stores and attempted to prohibit the sale of the album to teenagers. One record storeowner told the *Los Angeles Times*, "we're nervous to sell *anything* to anyone under the age of 18 now." A few weeks after the original court case, members of 2 Live Crew were arrested for performing their songs at an adult only venue, which the *Los Angeles Times* called "the latest legal move against the group on ground of obscenity." The *New York Times* reported that the band's members faced "fines upon conviction" and possibly one year in prison. The music itself was still on trial, as the judge ruled that "four songs played directly from the album...could serve as proof in court."²⁰

Cop Killer²¹

In contrast to vague fears that 2 Live Crew's music might contaminate youth with "obscenity," Ice-T's 1992 song "Cop Killer" was argued to incite real violence through its explicit lyrics. In a lyrical revenge fantasy against corrupt police officers, Ice-T rapped how he would "dust some cops off" with his "twelve gauge sawed off."

¹⁹ Deflem, "Rap, Rock, and Censorship," 6, 7; Rimer, "Obscenity or Art?" 1; Perkins, "The Rap Attack," 24; Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 393.

²⁰ Steve Jones, "Ban(ned) in the USA: Popular music and Censorship," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 15.1 (1991): 73; Rimer, "Obscenity or Art?" 3; Chuck Philips, "Record Retailers Charged: Lawsuit: Two Chains are Accused of Selling Rap Group 2 Live Crew Albums to Minors," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1992, accessed October 11, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1992-04-23/entertainment/ca-1584_1_live-crew; (first quote) Steve Hochman, "Two Members of 2 Live Crew Arrested After X-Rated Show," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1990, accessed October 11, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1990-06-11/entertainment/ca-89_1_live-crew (second quote); Talerman, "The Death of Tupac," 136; Mike Clary, "2 Live Crew Trial Opens: Defense Opposes Introduction of Tape," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1990, accessed October 10, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1990-10-17/news/mn-2423_1_live-crew (third quote).

²¹ Body Count, *Cop Killer*, Ice-T, © 1992 by Sire/Warner Bros, B000002MHE, Compact Disc.

He rapped, “I’m a cop killer, better you than me / Cop killer, fuck police brutality!” Notably, the song was produced by Ice-T’s heavy metal side project *Body Count*, but its adversaries considered it the epitome of dangerous gangsta rap.²²

The song ushered in a collective protest by police organizations across the nation. The Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas and the Dallas Police Association organized a press event in the summer of 1992, at which they demanded that “Cop Killer” be removed from *Body Count*’s album. Soon, the National Fraternal Order of Police, the National Association of Chiefs of Police and the governor of Alabama joined in to request a ban on the song. Nationwide, police departments staged protests to ban the song from the album, from radio stations, and to stop Ice-T’s label, *Time Warner*, from publishing similar music. They additionally demanded a public apology from the record label for publishing “Cop Killer.”²³

Police forces from all over the country argued that “Cop Killer” campaigned for the assassination of law enforcers. They suggested that the song had the power to incite real violence against officers. The President of the Fraternal Order of Police, Paul Taylor said in a 1992 interview with Chuck Philips, “People who ride around all night and use crack cocaine and listen to rap music that talks about killing cops – it’s bound to pump them up...No matter what anybody tells you, this kind of music is dangerous.”²⁴

²² Chuck Philips, “Police Groups Urge Halt of Record’s Sale: Time Warner Inc. Should Voluntarily stop Distribution of Ice-T’s ‘Cop Killer,’ Organizations Say,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1992, accessed September 24, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1992-06-16/entertainment/ca-444_1_time-warner; Body Count, “Cop Killer Lyrics,” accessed 18 October 2014, http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/body+count/cop+killer_20022078.html?utm_exp=19763888-0.KUHVg3T2QeioejamVO__w.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.nl%2F (quote); Talerman, “The Death of Tupac,” 137; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 396; Perkins, “Youth’s Global Village,” 179.

²³ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 145; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 395; Philips, “Police Groups Urge Halt of Record’s Sale,” 1.

²⁴ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 145; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 396; Paul Taylor, quoted in: Philips, “Police Groups Urge Halt of Record’s Sale,” 1 (quote).

President of the National Association of Chiefs of Police, Dennis R. Martin, devoted an entire article to the danger of “Cop Killer” in an *Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences* of 1993, in which he contended, “The *Cop Killer* song has been implicated in at least two shooting incidents and has inflamed racial tensions in cities across the country.” In a later *ACJS* publication, Mark Hamm and Jeff Ferrell argued that Martin had no solid proof for this claim, but that his misleading argument was easily adopted into the nationwide moral panic concerning gangsta rap. Martin further argued that “the ingrained hatred of police authority, already prevalent in poor urban ‘hoods’ is easily mobilized by the suggestive lyrics of rap.” He suggested that “with growing lawlessness and violence in our society,” police officers “deserve protection from abusive speech” and should not have to fear for their lives. Echoing claims by other protesting police officers, Martin denied that gangsta rap merely articulated existing tensions between police and poor neighborhood residents, but claimed gangsta rap actually caused it.²⁵

The campaign against “Cop Killer” was eventually taken to Washington D.C., where sixty congressmen endorsed a letter to Ice-T’s label *Time Warner*, claiming that the song did not deserve protection under the First Amendment because of *Time Warner*’s financial profitmaking on the song. Even president George H.W. Bush chimed in on the scandal, stating that, “It’s wrong for any company...to issue records that approve of killing a law enforcement officer.” Eventually, Ice-T dropped the song from his album and switched from *Time Warner* to a black-owned record company. In a public statement following this decision, he argued that police should understand

²⁵ Dennis R. Martin, “The Music of Murder,” *ACJS Today* 12 (1993): 1, 3, 20 (all quotes); Mark S. Hamm and Jeff Ferrell, “Rap, Cops, and Crime: Clarifying the ‘Cop Killer’ Controversy,” *ACJS Today* 13 (1994): 1, 3, 29.

that “this song is about anger and the community and how people get that way. It is not a call to murder police.”²⁶

Some police organizations recognized this sentiment and defended “Cop Killer”. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Ronald Hampton from the National Black Police Association in Washington: “This song is not a call for murder. It’s a rap of protest. Ice-T isn’t just making this stuff up...He’s responding to a very real issue that affects many Americans, especially blacks and Latinos: police brutality.” Hampton additionally argued that “there are no statistics to support the argument that a song can incite someone to violence.”²⁷

Don’t Hate the Playa²⁸

According to Jeff Chang, “Cop Killer” was singled out for protests because it gave police departments a chance to change the common narrative of police violence, in which the police was the aggressor. Moreover, ethnomusicologist Barry Shanks argued: “In public statements issued by national police organizations, ‘Cop Killer’ st[ood] in for rap music, which st[ood] in for black culture generally, and the ‘criminal element’ equals those ‘who make the streets of Los Angeles unsafe’.” As such, “Cop Killer” could be argued to not reflect, but cause real violence. After some highly publicized cases of police brutality against minorities, police could claim that

²⁶ Talerman, “The Death of Tupac,” 138 (first quote); Ice-T, quoted in: Chuck Philips, “Ice-T Pulls ‘Cop Killer’ Off the Market,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1992, 2, accessed October 3, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-07-29/news/mn-4656_1_cop-killer (second quote).

²⁷ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 118; Ronald Hampton, quoted in: Chuck Philips, “‘Cop Killer’ Controversy Spurs Ice-T Album Sales,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1992, 1, accessed October 11, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1992-06-18/entertainment/ca-913_1_cop-killer; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 397 (quote).

²⁸ Ice-T, *Don’t Hate the Playa*, © 1999 by Atomic Pop, B000021XVU, Compact Disc.

they were not perpetrators, but victims, and that racial profiling was merely a reaction to black aggression against police.²⁹

However, in their protests against gangsta rap, police officers sometimes became the aggressors. A few years earlier, in 1989, the song “Fuck the Police” had led several police to sabotage N.W.A.’s concerts by refusing security provision at concerts, forcing the artists to cancel their performances. During a Detroit performance of “Fuck the Police,” officers rushed onto N.W.A.’s stage and shut down the concert. *The Guardian* quoted one officer who remarked: “We just wanted to show the kids that you can’t say ‘fuck the police’ in Detroit.”³⁰

Despite a lack of conclusive proof, critics of gangsta rap continued to claim that the music could directly cause violence. The case of African-American Texan Ronald Howard demonstrates how seriously this idea was taken. In 1992, Howard fatally shot a police officer who pulled him over for speeding. During the incident, Howard had been listening to Tupac’s song “Soulja’s Story,” in which the protagonist kills a cop who pulls over his car. In his court defense, Howard claimed that the song had caused him to commit the crime. In an interview shortly after his arrest, he said, “[I]t’s my fault he’s dead, but I do believe the music affected me.” Although the court ruled that Howard was ultimately responsible for his own behavior, it did acknowledge that the song encouraged cop killing. The officer’s widow eventually sued Tupac and his record label in a liability case. Her case was widely supported by people who not only

²⁹ Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 396; Barry Shank, “Fears of the White Unconscious: Music, Race, and Identification in the Censorship Of ‘Cop Killer’,” *Radical History Review* 66 (1996): 131, 140; Mark Cooper, “From Rock’s Backpages: NWA: ‘Our Raps are Documentary. We Don’t Take Sides,” *The Guardian*, 7 August 2013. Accessed October 23, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/aug/07/nwa-1989-classic-interview> (quote).

³⁰ Rose, “Hidden Politics,” 240, original Source: “Advertisers Tap the Popularity of Rap,” *Wall Street Journal*, editorial, (November 19, 1987); Rose, *Black Noise*, 128; Talerman, “The Death of Tupac,” 136; Rose, *Black Noise*, 129., original source: Dave Marsh and Phyllis Pollack, “Wanted for Attitude,” *Village Voice*, 10 October, 1989, pp. 33-37; *The Guardian*, 7 August 2013, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/aug/07/nwa-1989-classic-interview> (quote).

cited Tupac's violent lyrics, but also his personal run-ins with the law as proof that his music was dangerous propaganda. However, even when gangsta rap was not blamed for actual murders, campaigners argued that gangsta rap seriously harmed society.³¹

Watcha Gon' Do?³²

Gangsta rap's misogyny became a specific point of discussion when African-American feminists became involved. The Congress of Black Women argued that gangsta rap was a lyrical attack on women in general and black women in particular. Feminist writer Bell Hooks told the *New York Times*, "A lot of misogynist rap is similar to crack...It gives [black men] a sense that they have power over their lives when they don't." Notably, female rappers often came to the defense of their male colleagues' misogynist lyrics. Although they did not necessarily agree with the music's misogynist sentiment, they were weary of being used as pawns in the political war waged against black men. They realized that any negative statements they made against male gangsta rappers would be used to affirm existing discourses that demonized both gangsta rap and black males, rather than to open up a conversation about gender equality for black women.³³

Black feminist Delores C. Tucker, who represented the National Political Congress of Black Women and had a history in civil rights activism, was one of the most vocal opponents of gangsta rap during the 1990s. She had been forced to give up

³¹ Chuck Philips, "Rap Defense Doesn't Stop Death Penalty," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1993, accessed October 18, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1993-07-15/entertainment/ca-13309_1_ronald-ray-howard (quote); Talerman, "The Death of Tupac," 117, 118.

³² Snoop Doggy Dogg, *Watcha Gon' Do?*, Master P, © 1998 by Priority Records, B000008UKN, Compact Disc.

³³ Johnson, "Silencing Gangsta Rap," 37; Kheven Lee LaGrone, "From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The 'Nigger' as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment," *Journal of African American Men* 5 (2000): 127; Bell Hooks, quoted in: Michel Marriot, "Hard-Core Rap Lyrics Stir Backlash," *The New York Times*, August 15, 1993, 1, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/15/nyregion/hard-core-rap-lyrics-stir-backlash.html> (quote); Rose, *Black Noise*, 149, 178.

a career in politics in the 1970s, after she publically became involved in corrupt practices. She regained political clout in the 1990s by teaming up with other black female activists and white conservatives to publicly condemn gangsta rappers' glorification of violence, their misogynist sentiments and their repudiation of holistic "family values." She told *Jet Magazine* in 1994, that her main goal was to "stop the whole-sale marketing of this kind of music across America," by organizing a "formal boycott of 'filthy' rap records and the radio and television stations that air them."³⁴

Tucker's ideas of how gangsta harmed society were varied and extreme. For example, she proposed that gangsta rap was part of a racial conspiracy campaign that abused black youth to achieve its goals. In an interview with music magazine *Vibe* in 1995, she argued, "They can't call us niggers, but they use our kids to say it, and also use our kids to commit genocide on each other," and she compared gangsta rap to Nazi propaganda. Misogyny and the glorification of drugs and violence were amongst Tucker's most referenced evils. During a self-requested congressional hearing on "the effects of violent and demeaning imagery in popular music on American youth" in 1994, she claimed that "[gangsta rap] coerces, influences, encourages and motivates our youth to commit violent behavior, to use drugs and abuse women through demeaning sex acts."³⁵

Tucker's motives were called into question when she began collaborating with white conservative politicians like William Bennett and Bob Dole. Presidential candidate Bob Dole publically chastised gangsta rap and record companies in public speeches to win votes. *The New York Times* noted that William Bennett, who had

³⁴ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 149; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 150; John Connolly, "Mama Said Knock U Out," *Vibe Magazine* 7.3 (1995): 93-94 (first quote); "Women Crusade Against 'Gangsta Rap,'" *Jet Magazine* (10 January 1994): 15 (second quote).

³⁵ Delores C. Tucker, quoted in: Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 150 (first quote); Connolly, "Mama Said Knock U Out," 93; Abbie Carse, "Gangsta Rap: An MTV News Special Report w Tupac, Snoop Dogg, Dr Dre, Eazy E 1994," *YouTube* Video, February 17, 2012, (18:11). (30:45). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uazsQER5_GA (second quote).

been director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy during Bush's presidency, opened his anti-gangsta rap crusade when "the nation was heading into a Presidential election in which family values and the role of popular culture were hot-button issues." Both politicians famously opposed affirmative action and had a firm hand in the creation of new laws that led to a rapid incarceration of large numbers of black youth. Some people questioned how Tucker could be protecting black youth while teaming up with their enemies and silencing their representatives.³⁶

Testifying in the 1994 congressional hearing on harmful music, Tucker even seemed to encourage further political action against young black men:

As we have seen in the last thirty years, increasing law enforcement and correctional facilities have not reduced crime... Being coaxed by gangster rap, [black youth] will trigger a crime wave of epidemic proportions that we have never seen the likes of. Regardless of the number of jails built, it will not be enough. Neither will there be enough police or government programs to contain the explosion of crime."³⁷

At the same time that she expressed concern for gangsta rap's effect on black youth, Tucker suggested that young poor blacks were a potential danger to society and that gangsta rap helped rally them into a dangerous mob that could not be stopped by incarceration or policing. Instead of rejecting the destructive action taken against black youth by the American government, she seemed to suggest that it was not enough.³⁸

³⁶ Ogbar, "Slouching Towards Bork," 172; Mark Landler, "William Bennet Takes on Edgar Bronfman Jr. Over MCA's Gangsta Rap Product," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1996, accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/16/business/william-bennett-takes-on-edgar-bronfman-jr-over-mca-s-gangsta-rap-product.html> (quote); Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 150.

³⁷ Delores C. Tucker, quoted in, Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 453 (quote).

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 453.

Another famous African-American protester of gangsta rap was reverend Calvin Butts. He had a flair for the sensational, exemplified by a 1993 anti-rap demonstration in which he ran a steamroller over gangsta rap cd's, after which he meant to put the rubble into little body bags and drop them off at the door of record companies. He said about his actions in a public speech later that year: "We're not against rap [or] rappers. But we are against those thugs who disgrace our community, our women, who disgrace our culture, and who have absolutely nothing of redemptive value to offer except a legacy of violence, sexual assault and foul language."³⁹

Several other black leaders weighed in on the gangsta rap debate, albeit more moderately than Tucker and Butts. Most of them agreed that gangsta rap had negative aspects, but argued that there was a danger in trying to silence gangsta rappers. Reverend Al Sharpton was quoted by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1995, saying, "Yes, I have a problem as a parent with some of these lyrics, but I have even more of a problem with the right wing using this concern as an excuse to usher in censorship. [It] will infringe on our First Amendment rights." Jesse Jackson, who was the face of black American politics at the time, wrote in a 1995 *Vibe* magazine column, "There is no excuse for some of these lyrics. But there is also no excuse for our ghettos--where young men can't find jobs nor support families, where hope has gone and drugs and guns become a way out." U.S. representative Maxine Waters argued, "These are our children and they've invented a new art form to describe their pains, fears and frustrations with us as adults. Just because we don't like the symbols they use or the way they look, we should not allow that to cause us to embark on a course of

³⁹ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 150; Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 148; Perkins, "Global Youth Village," 296; OfficialGangstaMusik, "Report on Gangsta Rap (1993) (Rare Eazy-E Interview)," *YouTube* Video, 22 June, 2011 (12:13), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzeEasC1wwE>, (2:46) (quote).

ensorship."⁴⁰

*Ain't Nut'in Personal*⁴¹

The racial connotation of gangsta rap made it difficult to determine whether action against it was indicative of racist sentiments. Some believed it was. According to scholar Jason Talerma, attacks on rap and gangsta rap were generally marked by racist motives. Ice-T told *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1992, "politically, they know by saying the word rap they can get a lot of people who think, 'rap-black, rap-black ghetto'." In an interview with music magazine *The Source*, Frank Zappa, who had himself been on trial for his heavy metal records, said: "The whole racist aroma swinging from the metal aspect to the rap aspect is a bit suspicious. The devil stuff didn't work. The devil business only played in certain parts of the country."⁴²

However, aversion to gangsta rap was not solely a "white thing." Gangsta rap solicited a strong reaction from several groups within the African-American community, who feared that gangsta rap's misogynist, violent, and homophobic messages propagated a misguided and dangerous image of African Americans. In 1993, *The New York Times* reported that groups such as the Masses United for Human Rights, chapters of the NAACP and African American ministers from major cities

⁴⁰ Al Sharpton, quoted in: Greg Braxton and Jerry Crowe, "Black Leaders Weighing In on Rap Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1995, accessed September 3, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-06-14/entertainment/ca-12907_1_time-warner (first quote); Jesse Jackson, "On the Dole," *Vibe Magazine* 7.3 (September 1995), 39 (second quote); Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 149; Maxine Waters quoted in: Braxton and Crowe, "Black Leaders Weighing In on Rap Debate" (third quote).

⁴¹ Snoop Doggy Dogg, *Ain't Nut'in Personal*, C-Murder, Silkkthe Shocker, © 1998 by Priority Records, B000008UKN, Compact Disc.

⁴² Talerma, "The Death of Tupac," 121; Ice-T in: Allen Light, "Ice-T raps about the LA Riots, the 'Cop Killer' controversy, and getting political," *Rolling Stone*, August 20, 1992, 5, accessed September 13, 2014, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-rolling-stone-interview-ice-t-19920820> (first quote); Frank Zappa in: Phyllis Pollack, "FBI Hitlist Sa Prize Part 2," *The Source* (September 1990): 20 (second quote).

took part in marches, demonstrations and protests against “immoral and self-destructive” lyrics.⁴³

By presenting themselves as rude, aggressive, hypersexual, and anti-authority, gangsta rappers reaffirmed stereotypes that had long been used to justify slavery, lynching and institutional racism, and they entertained white America by doing so. Many African Americans believed that gangsta rap sensationalized exactly those stereotypes that they had worked so hard to refute. The National Political Congress of Black Women suggested that gangsta rappers’ demeanor and music would “label all African-American artists as violent.” Even some of those whom gangsta rap claimed to represent spoke out against the music, and believed that gangsta rappers cashed in on stories that they actually had to live through without seeing any change. Gang member OG Tweedy Bud Loc said: “I’m fed up with the busters [hustlers] like NWA. A lot of my homies in the neighborhood died, man, and what the niggas did was market our life and our image. All them niggas in NWA is buster! They never give back to the neighborhood.”⁴⁴

Gangsta rappers’ excessive use of the word “nigga” additionally triggered heated debates within the African-American community. Gangsta rappers used the word as a token of affection and racial pride, but also as an insult. They were regularly blamed for professing racial “self-hatred” and “playing into white racism.” Although Jesse Jackson generally denounced anti-gangsta rap activism, he told *Newsweek* in 1993, “Anyone white or black who makes money calling our women ‘bitches’ and our people ‘niggers’ will have to face the wrath of our indignation.” Even Tipper Gore

⁴³ LaGrone, “From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap,” 127, 139; Marriot, “Hard-Core Rap Lyrics Stir Backlash,” 2 (quote).

⁴⁴ LaGrone, “From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap,” 124; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 133; Von Alexander, quoted in: Talerma, “The Death of Tupac,” 139 (first quote); OG Tweedy Bud Loc, quoted in: Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 83 (second quote).

chimed in on the conversation and wrote in a *Washington Post* editorial: "Do we want [our kids] describing themselves or each other as "niggers'?"⁴⁵

Shorty Wanna Be a Thug⁴⁶

Gangsta rap's popularity with young African Americans worried older generations. They were worried by black youths' treatment of the African-American legacy. Black youth seemed to be influenced more by popular media than by traditional black religious, familial and educational, institutions. They heralded "outrageous" values that older black generations had difficulty identifying with, especially when these values dismissed the Civil Rights struggles that the older generation had lived through.⁴⁷

Black adversaries of gangsta rap regularly appropriated a civil rights-inspired discourse, emphasizing gangsta raps' departure from the prideful days of the Civil Rights era. Delores Tucker asked journalist Chuck Philips in 1996, "What do you think Dr. King would have to say about rappers calling black women bitches and whores? About rappers glorifying thugs and drug dealers and rapists?" However, some older African Americans began to realize that the promise of racial uplift had little practical influence on the young black generation of the 1990s. Still, they

⁴⁵ Clifford Levy, "Harlem Protest of Rap Lyrics Draws Debate and Steamroller," *New York Times*, June 9, 1993, accessed October 26, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/06/nyregion/harlem-protest-of-rap-lyrics-draws-debate-and-steamroller.html> (first quote); Nick de Genova, "Gangsta Rap and the Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death," *Social Text* 43 (1995): 117 (first quote); Kitwana, *Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 26; Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 85; Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 136; Jesse Jackson, quoted in: John Leland, "Criminal Records," *Newsweek*, 28 November 1993, accessed November 3, 2014. <http://www.newsweek.com/criminal-records-191438> (second quote); Tipper Gore, quoted in: Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 393 (third quote).

⁴⁶ Tupac, *Shorty Wanna Be a Thug*, © 1995, 2005 by Koch Records, B00005AQE8, 2 Compact Discs.

⁴⁷ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 291; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 149; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 150-153; Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 149.

wondered what good gangsta rap's glorification of "bad" blackness could possibly bring to the black community as a whole.⁴⁸

Gangsta rappers had their own thoughts about accusations of their music's harmful effects. Tupac told *The Los Angeles Times* in 1993, "I am not trying to recruit your little kids, I'm not looking to be the black people's savior." With regards to "Cop Killer," Ice-T argued in *The New York Times*, "At no point do I go out and say, 'Let's do it...I'm singing in the first person as a character who is fed up with police brutality. I ain't never killed no cop. I felt like it a lot of times. But I never did it.'" In a 1994 interview with MTV, Snoop Doggy Dogg said, "Reverend Butts ain't got no love for us...And it shouldn't be like that, especially if he's a preacher."⁴⁹

*You Got What I Want*⁵⁰

What made gangsta rap increasingly controversial was its growing young, white fan base. White youths began wearing the fashion that they saw their favorite rappers wear on television, in effect appropriating the cultural expressions of youth that grew up in economically disenfranchised neighborhoods. By listening to gangsta rap and wearing "gangsta" fashion, white suburban teens could appropriate some of its "bad-ass" image without actually having to have live the life described in gangsta rap. This brought up the complex issue of cultural appropriation. Some critics accused gangsta

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 204; Delores C. Tucker, quoted in: "Anti-Rap Crusader Under Fire," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1996, accessed October 16, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-fi-tupacdelores20march2096-story.html#page=1> (quote); Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 151, 152; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 153; Perkins, "Global Youth Village," 267.

⁴⁹ Tupac quoted in: Aesther Iverem, "The Softer Side of Tupac," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1993, accessed October 16, 2014. http://articles.latimes.com/print/1993-07-24/entertainment/ca-16497_1_poetic-justice; Shank, "Fears of the White Unconscious," 133 (first quote); Ice-T, quoted in: "Rapper Defends Song Against Spreading Boycott," *The New York Times*, June 19, 1992, accessed October 16, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/19/arts/rapper-ice-t-defends-song-against-spreading-boycott.html> (second quote); Snoop Doggy Dogg quoted in: Abbie Carse, "Gangsta Rap: An MTV News Special Report w Tupac, Snoop Dogg, Dr Dre, Eazy E 1994," (20:12) *YouTube* Video, February 17, 2012, (30:45), (third quote). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uazsQER5_GA.

⁵⁰ Snoop Doggy Dogg, *You Got What I Want*, Ludacris, Goldie Loc, Uncle Charlie Wilson, © 2002 by Parlapphone, B000TETKI0, Compact Disc.

rappers of “selling out” by catering their product to the racial fantasies of white audiences. *The New Yorker* journalist Connie Bruck suggested that it was the white appropriation of gangsta rap’s style that solicited such fear in Americans and fueled political debates.⁵¹

Gangsta rappers themselves had different opinions about their white fan base. When Brian Cross asked Dr. Dre about his initial reaction to “white kids in the suburbs...bumping gangsta” in a 1993 interview, he said, “It bugged me out the first time I saw that shit.” Chuck D and Ice-T believed that white and black youths’ simultaneous embrace of gangsta rap was the ultimate form of “cultural desegregation.” Eazy E told scholar Brian Cross in 1993: “They buy something like 70 percent of our stuff. They wanna really learn what’s going on in different parts of the neighborhood, they wanna be down, just like I want to be down too.”⁵²

The growing white market also inspired the music industry’s attraction to gangsta rap. Music manager Lyor Cohen argues that many advertisers who initially shied away from gangsta rap’s black and violent image, realized that they could cater to an audience they knew: “Now these white, suburban, establishment types see that their own kids are into rap.” But these white, suburban establishment types also grew increasingly concerned with their sons’ and daughters’ obsession with gangsta rap. It

⁵¹ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 249, 290, 320; Neil Strauss, “Rap’s a Ten Percent Slice of the Recording Industry Pie,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1995, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/05/business/rap-s-a-10-slice-of-the-recording-industry-pie.html>; Anderson, *Code of the Street*, 234; Kitwana, *The Rap on Gangsta Rap*, 16-19; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 113; Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 136 (quote); Connie Bruck, “The Takedown of Tupac,” *The New Yorker*, July 7, 1997, 46.

⁵² Dr. Dre, quoted in: Brian Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary...Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles: with additional texts by Reagan Kelly and T-Love* (Verso: New York, 1993), 198 (first quote); Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 425 (second quote); Eazy-E, quoted in: Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 201 (third quote).

was no coincidence that the PMRC, police departments, Tucker, Butts, and others, all included attacks on record labels in their campaigns against gangsta rap.⁵³

Point Tha Finga⁵⁴

Although it is true that different groups and individuals each attacked different aspects of gangsta rap, anti-gangsta rap campaigns were rarely focused on one particular characteristic. For example, as a feminist, Delores Tucker attacked gangsta rap's misogyny, but she also attacked gangsta rap's glorification of violence and drugs. Tipper Gore's concerns ranged from gangsta rap's explicit descriptions of sex to its elaborate use of racial and misogynist epithets. Moreover, some critics simultaneously disapproved of some of gangsta rap's characteristics while encouraging others. Jesse Jackson for example, refuted gangsta rap's negative portrayal of black Americans while he appreciated its potential as a voice for disadvantaged black youth.⁵⁵

Despite the many ways in which gangsta rap was challenged and attacked during the 1980s and '90s, anti-gangsta rap campaigns were generally unsuccessful. Arrests and hearings of salesmen, artists, and record labels; regulation and labeling of music albums; cancellations of concerts; boycotts by radio and television stations; mass protests; public letters, speeches, and drives – they all failed to stop gangsta rap from rising in popularity. However, the omnipresence and controversy of anti-gangsta rap campaigns did succeed at spreading public concern over the new, and highly popular music.⁵⁶

⁵³ Lyor Cohen, quoted in: Perkins, "Youth's Global Village," 285. Original Source: "Advertisers Tap the Popularity of Rap," *Wall Street Journal*, editorial, November 19, 1987; LaGrone, "From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap," 127; Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 396.

⁵⁴ Tupac, *Point Tha Finga*, Big D The Impossible, © 1998 by Interscope Records, B000005Z0G, Compact Disc.

⁵⁵ *A Change is Gonna Come*, 257; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 145.

⁵⁶ Lynxwiler & Gay, "Moral Boundaries and Deviant Music," 69.

Anti-gangsta rap campaigns of the 1990s promoted the idea that gangsta rap was the cause and ultimate symbol of violence and criminality in American society. As gangsta rappers increasingly came to represent the problems they addressed – police brutality, excessive violence, drug trade, skewed gender relationships – some people began to hold them responsible for causing or aggravating these issues.

Although campaigns against gangsta rap represented extremes in society, general analogies between gangsta rap and popular images of blackness and criminality fed into public confusion and concern over what gangsta rap was. In many ways, gangsta rap became the only visible representation of America's disadvantaged neighborhoods, which had profoundly problematic consequences for the public understanding of those neighborhoods and their residents. As the 1990s progressed, calls for America to “get tough” on gangsta rap coincided with a surge in “get tough” policies aimed at residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, and gangsta rappers found themselves at a confusing crossroads between cultural representation, stereotyped fears, and politics.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 2, 3, 12; Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 290; Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 187.

*A Hazy Shade of Criminal*¹

Gangsta Rap and Black Stereotypes

The controversial characteristics of gangsta rap that had been at the center of equally controversial campaigns against the music, already had a long and complicated standing in American society and politics. Stereotypes of blackness, crime and poverty have justified discriminatory treatment of certain demographics throughout American history. Moreover, these stereotypes had been used to justify federal neglect and heavy policing of neighborhoods like Compton for decades before gangsta rap came up. Gangsta rappers' self-appropriated image as the ultimate lawless, sex-crazed, black boogiemani was very similar to historical imagery that profiled African Americans as a threat to American society. Moreover, in some instances such images were used to influence voting choices in political campaigns. A popular example is that of Willie Horton, a convicted African-American murderer who incited great fear amongst the American public in the late 1980s, and whose image was used as a political pawn in the 1988 presidential elections.²

With its controversial and stereotypical imagery, gangsta rap simultaneously confronted America with the effects of continued federal neglect neighborhoods like Compton, and justified further "benign neglect," as well as increased policing of those neighborhoods. During the 1990s, as anti-gangsta rap campaigns sprung up all over the country, federal and state governments introduced new policies that severely affected the social demographic that gangsta rap represented. Intensification of

¹ Public Enemy, *A Hazy Shade of Criminal*, © 1992, 1994 by Def Jam Records, B00000241Q, Compact Disc.

² LaGrone, "From Minstrilsy to Gangsta Rap," 125; John Hurwitz & Mark Peffley, "Playing the Race Card in the Post-Willie Horton Era: The Impact of Racialized Code Words on Support for Punitive Crime Policy," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 69.1 (2005): 100.

America's war on drugs, militarization of police forces, racial profiling, and mass-incarceration considerably impacted the lives of young, primarily black and Latino men. In a society where the image of crime was perpetuated as black, male and poor, it was difficult to argue that gangsta rap exemplified the destructive effects of structural neglect, and was not the ultimate exemplification of America's incorrigible minority youth.³

The exaggerated imagery of gangsta rap allowed for further fictionalization of the demographic that the music represented, which complicated the fact that gangsta rap spoke out about very real social, political, economic and racial issues. How did gangsta rap's stereotypical portrayal of young black men influence its societal impact as a public representative for neighborhoods like Compton? To answer this question, this chapter explores some of the most striking ways in which gangsta rap influenced and intersected with the public and political conversation regarding issues such as crime, drugs, racial tensions, and police brutality. Additionally, this chapter investigates the ways in which gangsta rappers spoke for, and were understood to represent, residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, specifically in relation to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. This chapter discloses some of the problematic consequences of the similarity between stereotypes appropriated by gangsta rappers and stereotypes used to justify a tougher political attitude towards disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Extradition⁴

The political and economical disenfranchisement of neighborhoods like Compton that had been carried out under the Reagan and Bush administrations, continued during the 1990s. Political and industrial reforms that benefitted the rich, frequently

³ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 109, 152; Davis, *City of Quartz*, 290; Kelley, *Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics*, 118.

⁴ Ice Cube, *Extradition*, © 1998 by Priority Records, B00000DFRV, Compact Disc.

disadvantaged the poor. Previously reduced budgets for economic, residential, educational and other forms of federal assistance were barely increased. Welfare policies were progressively unraveled, and in 1996, California passed Proposition 209, which broke down affirmative action for governmental institutions. Moreover, America's war on drugs intensified during the 1990s, including tougher drug and crime laws, and the construction of many new prisons.⁵

These new policies disproportionately affected poor, minority citizens. For example, different versions of so-called "Three Strikes" laws, which included harsh mandatory sentencing for minor offenses, were instituted nationwide. Official data show that "African-Americans in California [were] disproportionately sentenced under Three Strikes compared to the proportion of serious crimes they commit[ed]." Three Strikes laws harshly penalized possession of small amounts of cheap drugs that were disproportionately used by the black population, like crack cocaine and marijuana, but not larger amounts expensive drugs, like powdered cocaine, which catered mainly to the wealthy, primarily white population. The Three Strikes law that was introduced in California in 1994 required at least 25 years- to life imprisonments for delinquents who had committed two or more prior offenses, including non-violent offenses such as petty theft or possession of drugs.⁶

The stereotypical imagery used to justify implementation of these new policies often equated blackness with crime. Media outlets produced a never ending stream of images depicting America's "problem" of crime, drugs, and gang activity as young

⁵ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang*, 45; Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 391; Wacquant & Wilson, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion," 11, 15; Girardeau A. Spann, "Proposition 209," *Duke Law Journal* 47.2 (1997): 190.

⁶ Thomas B. Marvel and Carlisle E. Moody, "The Lethal Effects of Three-Strikes Laws," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 89 (2001): 89; Mike Males, Dan Macallair, and Khaled Taqi-Eddin, "Striking Out: The Failure of California's 'Three Strikes and You're Out' Law," *Justice Policy Institute* (1999): 66-67 (quote); Knoll D. Lowney, "Smoked not Snorted: Is Racism Inherent in our Crack Cocaine Laws?" *Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law* 45 (1994): 122, 135.

and black. According to social scholars Craig Reinerman and Harry Levine, “what is defined as crime determines who is oppressed in American society and simultaneously legitimates that oppression.” Even though drug and gang related crime decreased during the 1990s, stereotyped fears of a criminal wave washing over the nation encouraged Americans to vote for more and harsher policies on crime. In their study of race in the American war on drugs, Benjamin Steiner and Victor Argothy argue that racial ideology and stereotyping heavily influenced this “war,” and America’s drug problem was masqueraded as a predominantly African-American and Latino-American problem. This simultaneously produced a counter-image of whites as “good citizens” who recognized their duty to rid America from drugs and crime by asserting “tough on crime” policies, and putting dangerous black and brown citizens behind bars.⁷

Definition of a West Coast G⁸

In some cases, the similarity between the image of gangsta rappers and the stereotypical image of crime had problematic consequences. In the late 1980s, the LA County Sheriff’s Department and the Law Enforcement Communication Network introduced the “Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking System” (GREAT), which was meant to record and evaluate suspected gang members. California’s gang-database would become the most extensive database in the country, serving as an example for local and state-controlled databases all over America, including one

⁷ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 164; Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, “Crack in Context: Politics and Media in the Making of a Drug Scare,” *Contemporary Drug Problems* 535 (1989): 538 (first quote); Linda S. Beres and Thomas D. Griffith, “Demonizing Youth,” *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* 34 (2001): 750; Benjamin D. Steiner and Victor Argothy, “White Addiction: Racial Inequality, Racial Ideology, and the War on Drugs,” *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review* 10 (2000-2001): 444 (second quote).

⁸ Ice Cube, *Definition of a West Coast G*, © 2006 by Lench Mob Records, B000FILWFY, Compact Disc.

federally funded database run by the FBI. Committing an actual crime was not necessary to be entered into a database, and entries significantly depended on subjective personal judgment by authorities. Even after revisions, if a person met two or more criteria, including “‘gang-style’ clothing,” “display of gang signs or symbols,” or “frequenting gang territories,” they could be entered into an official database. One list even included “or any other criteria.” Since it was virtually impossible to distinguish between popular ‘gangsta’ fashion styles and fashion worn by gang members, wearing the same fashion as their favorite gangsta rappers could get innocent youths officially listed as criminals.⁹

In itself, official recognition of “gangsta” fashion as a legitimate sign of criminality was highly problematic, but being entered into gang databases also had severely problematic consequences. Listed individuals did not have to be notified of their registration in a database, but were likely to face increased harassment and tracking by authorities. Additionally, potential employers or landlords could call a hotline to see if a name appeared on a gang-list. Those affected by this were primarily young and black or brown. Around 80 percent of individuals entered into gang databases across America were of African-American descent, and Latino youth made up most of the additional 20 percent. In some areas where minorities were hardly represented, ethnic minorities made up over 90 percent of gang databases. Reverend

⁹ Stacey, Leyton, "The New Blacklists: The Threat to Civil Liberties Posed by Gang Databases.," in *Crime Control and Social Justice: The Delicate Balance*, ed. Darnell F. Hawkins, Samuel L. Meyers, Jr., and Randolph N. Stone (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 2-4, *The African American Experience*. Accessed September 22, 2014. <http://testaae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=GM0790E&chapterID=GM0790E-643&path=chunkbook>; James B. Jacobs, “Gang Databases: Context and Questions,” *American Society of Criminology* 8.4 (2009): 706; Malcolm W. Klein, “Street gang databases: A view from the gang capitol of the United States,” *American Society of Criminology*, 8.4 (2009): 718, 719 (quotes).

Tillman of the NAACP told *The New York Times* in 1993, “they ought to call it the blacklist...It’s not a crackdown on gangs; it’s a crackdown on blacks.”¹⁰

*You Ain’t Gotta Lie*¹¹

Because of its stereotypical imagery, gangsta rap could be strategically used as a symbol of race and crime in political appeals. Political scientists John Hurwitz and Mark Peffley analyzed the effect of implicitly racialized code words in political campaigns on peoples’ voting patterns. Although they concluded that people are weary of overtly racialized political appeals, and “racial liberals” generally reject any racialized tactic, their research showcased “how easily opinion can be manipulated, and...how easy it can be to ‘play the race card’.” Taking into account that controversy over black music has a history of being used to influence voting in political campaigns, it is unsurprising gangsta rap – the most racialized and criminalized cultural product of the time – was used as a political tool during the 1990s.¹²

One powerful example of this is Bill Clinton’s commentary on statements made by female rapper Sista Souljah during the 1992 Democratic primaries. In an attempt to extenuate his compassion for the African-American community and appeal to more Republican voters, Clinton quoted Sista Souljah’s interview with *The Washington Post*, published a few weeks prior. He chose the Rainbow Coalition meeting, organized by African-American politician Jesse Jackson, to turn Souljah’s words into an example of the rapper’s hostility towards white America. In the original interview,

¹⁰ Leyton, “The New Blacklists,” 7, 15; James B. Jacobs, “Gang Databases: Context and Questions,” *American Society of Criminology* 8.4 (2009): 707; Rev. Oscar Tillman, senior official of the Denver NAACP, quoted in: Dirk Johnson, “2 Out of 3 Young Black Men in Denver Are on Gang Suspect List,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1993, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/11/us/2-of-3-young-black-men-in-denver-listed-by-police-as-suspected-gangsters.html> (quote).

¹¹ Ice Cube, *You Ain’t Gotta Lie*, Chris Rock, © 2000 by Priority Records, B0000419SP, Compact Disc.

¹² Hurwitz and Peffley, “Playing the Race Card in the Post-Willie Horton Era,” 99, 109-110 (quote).

Sista Souljah explained that the commonality of black-on-black violence for gang members lowered their threshold for committing black-on-white violence. She said, “If you’re a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person? Do you think that somebody thinks that white people are better, or above dying, when they would kill their own kind?” Clinton proposed that her statement was a form of hate speech, arguing that Souljah had a big influence on her fans, and that “if you took the words white and black and you reversed them, you might think David Duke was giving that speech.” In similar attempts to swing votes by using the popular reputation of gangsta rap, politicians such as William Bennett and Bob Dole attacked gangsta rap-producing music labels to convince voters of their concern with American youth’s morality.¹³

These events and their complex implications did not go unnoticed by gangsta rappers. When asked about Clinton’s and other politicians’ use of gangsta rap in their campaigns, Ice-T stated:

These politicians, they have advisers, they don’t say anything if it’s not all planned out... So somebody said this is a way you can attack this girl, and say what you want... They wanted to pull my record to look good and get the press off they back, but the minute I pulled the record the media was right back on they ass.¹⁴

Even though Clinton’s strategy was questionable, it had the desired success. *The Chicago Tribune* reported that tracking polls demonstrated an immediate boost in

¹³ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 309, 311, 395; Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 395; David Mills, “Sister Souljah’s Call to Arms: The Rapper Says the Riots Were Payback. Are You Paying Attention?” B1, *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1992 ((ProQuest Historical Newspapers) (first quote); Clinton Campaign Speech, “Sista Souljah Moment,” *C-Span* Video, July 28, 2013 (2:34), <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4460582/sister-souljah-moment> (second quote); Jason Tranz, *Other People’s Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America*, (Bloomsbury USA: New York, 2007), 141; Landler, “William Bennett takes on Edgar Bronfman Jr.”

¹⁴ Ice-T, quoted in: Cross, *It’s Not About A Salary*, 189 (quote).

Clinton's popularity directly following the event, which "quickly took him from third place behind Ross Perot to first." One Philadelphian said: "The day he told off that f*cking Jackson is the day he got mine." At the same time, Clinton alienated some of his black supporters. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Jesse Jackson believed that Clinton's criticism was "unnecessary and a diversion," and he urged Clinton to offer his apologies to the female rapper. Souljah herself accused Clinton of vilifying her for personal political gains, by making her "a Willie Horton, a campaign issue, a black monster that would scare the white population."¹⁵

*A Gangsta's Fairytale*¹⁶

In both politics and gangsta rap of the 1990s, the difference between fantasy and reality was blurred. During the early 1980s, American politics became what political scientist Shawn J. Parry-Giles has called "image-based." Ever since the Reagan era, the distinction between reality and fiction or clever anecdote was almost impossible to make. Political geographer Edward Soja, in his historiography of Los Angeles, calls political substitution of reality with stereotypes "hypersimulation." Soja argues that hypersimulation was especially popular amongst neoconservatives in the 1990s, who used this technique to justify a tougher approach to economically disenfranchised neighborhoods. However, gangsta rappers also used hypersimulation. Their take on what it meant to live in areas like Compton was very much captured in stigmatized stereotypes. Moreover, gangsta rappers, who often referred to their music as "reality rap," combined realism with fantastical exaggeration in their music. Gangsta rap narratives were often told in the first person, making it easy to argue that rappers were

¹⁵ Philadelphian quoted in: Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 311 (first quote); Sam Fulwood III, "Clinton Chides Rap Singer, Stuns Jackson," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1992 (second quote), accessed November 9, 2014. http://articles.latimes.com/print/1992-06-14/news/mn-794_1_bill-clinton; Sister Souljah quoted in Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 395 (third quote).

¹⁶ Ice Cube, *A Gangsta's Fairytale*, © 1990 by Priority Records, B000003B6X, Compact Disc.

describing personal beliefs or incidents, instead of describing a certain mentality. Consequently, gangsta rappers could be argued to represent the incorrigible nature of criminal young black men.¹⁷

The Day The Niggaz Took Over¹⁸

Gangsta rappers' position as public representatives for disadvantaged neighborhoods and young black rage, came into new light after the 1992 Los Angeles riots that followed the acquittal of the Los Angeles' officers responsible for the beating of Rodney King. These events brought attention to issues that gangsta rap addressed, specifically police brutality and the growing frustration in impoverished neighborhoods. An amateur recording of the police beating of King – an African-American Los Angeles resident who had been pulled over and severely beaten by a group of police officers in 1991 – was broadcast nationwide, sparking intense debates and building high tension around the officers' trial in 1992. The footage showed King defenselessly lying on the street, while a group of officers alternately approach him to beat him with sticks and kick him. *ABC L.A. News* argued that the video exemplified “a history of brutality and misconduct [of the Los Angeles police department] that goes back a quarter of a century.” *The Wall Street Journal* labeled the 1992 riots –

¹⁷ Shawn J. Parry-Giles, “Image-Based Politics, Feminism and the Consequences of their Convergence,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15:4 (1998): 460 (first quote); Diane Rubenstein, “The Mirror of Reproduction: Baudrillard and Reagan’s America,” *Political Theory* 17.4 (1989): 585; Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 249; Edward W. Soja, “Los Angeles, 1965-1992: From “Crisis-Generated Restructuring to Restructuring-Generated Crisis,” in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (1996 Los Angeles: University of California Press), 456 (second quote); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 2, 3; Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang*, 60, 100, 187.

¹⁸ Dr. Dre, *The Day The Niggaz Took Over*, RBX, Snoop Dogg, Dat Nigga Daz, © 1992 by Death Row Records, B00FW66CT0, Compact Disc.

which not only took place in Los Angeles, but in Phoenix, Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle, New York and other cities – “the nation’s worst civil unrest in a century.”¹⁹

In an effort to explain the sudden eruption of mass-violence, many mainstream media outlets turned to gangsta rappers. According to Tricia Rose, it is not surprising that the mainstream media turned to rappers, since they were not as directed by political correctness or hidden agendas as politicians and the mainstream media. They passionately spoke about issues that were commonly tip-toed around. Moreover, they wrapped their message up with enticing sounds and poeticism, making their commentary all the more engaging. The *New York Times* reported: “Before South-Central Los Angeles went up in a billion dollars' worth of flames, the only voices from the area that most Americans had heard were the swaggering storytellers of gangster rap.” The fact that the whole nation could now see what the frustration described in most gangsta rap songs could lead to, generated new interest in what exactly gangsta rappers had to say.²⁰

After the riots, gangsta rappers were suddenly viewed as specialists on police brutality and black rage, and they received an almost prophet-like appreciation. As Compton residents, most gangsta rappers had witnessed police brutality in their neighborhoods their whole lives. They had addressed the topic countless times before the Rodney King tape emerged. Gangsta rapper Ice Cube, when asked by MTV to give his opinion on the beating, said, “It’s been happening to us for years. It’s just we

¹⁹ Reeves, 109, 137-138; Chang, 338, 368; Whitesxican, “Rodney King Beating (Full Version),” *YouTube* Video, 9:39, June 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OauOPTwbqk>; Johnny Faragher, “Rodney King Tape on National News.flv,” *YouTube* Video, 15 Nov. 2010, 1:32, 0:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SW1ZDIXiuS4&list=PL7F3E7CEC8B653197> (first quote); Frederick Rose and Benjamin A. Holden, “Jury in Rodney King Case Rejects Call for Punitive Damages against Officers,” *The Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition New York, N.Y.*, 2 June 1994, B6 (ProQuest), (second quote).

²⁰ Reeves, 138; Rose, *Black Noise*, 122; Jon Pareles, “Rap After the Riot: Smoldering Rage and No Apologies,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/13/arts/pop-view-rap-after-the-riot-smoldering-rage-and-no-apologies.html> (quote).

didn't have a camcorder every time it happened.”²¹

Rappers used their new platform to share their insights on the causes and meaning of the riots, and raised difficult question about race, class, and structural discrimination. In a 1993 *Washington Post* article, Ice-T blamed the 1992 riots on a combination of class- and racial differences: “We have a common enemy, and that’s the people who don’t want to give out equality – because to issue economic equality, they have to issue racial equality, and there’s a lot of people who still aren’t willing to do that.” Ice Cube simply told *The New York Times*: “Anything you wanted to know about the riot was in the records before the riot.”²²

Scholar Brian Cross interviewed multiple gangsta rappers shortly after the riots, collecting some controversial insights. Ice Cube told him:

If George Bush was in the middle of that thing he would have been looting... There was a lot of lying, a lot of bullshit and definite racism... These muthafuckers [police officers] trained for years how to deal with this situation and they let the racism get to ‘em and they just beat the shit out of this guy.²³

Some rappers argued that mainstream media coverage of the L.A. riots was part of a conspiracy to support institutional racism. Big Syke from L.A. gangsta rap group O.F.T.B. argued, “What they playing really is to get a racial thing started up down here... So they can go ahead to say, I told you, minority niggers and [Latinos] can’t act.” Shorty, from rap group Da Lench Mob, argued, “If our album would have

²¹ Kelley, *Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Balistics*, 118; Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 137; Ice Cube, quoted in: Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Verso, 2011), 184 (quote).

²² Ice-T, quoted in: Richard Harrington, “Ice-T and the Invasion of White Suburbia,” *The Washington Post*, Mar 24, 1993, B7 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers) (first quote); Pareles, “Rap After the Riot,” 1 (second quote).

²³ Ice Cube, quoted in: Cross, *It’s Not About a Salary*, 215-216 (quote).

dropped at the same time as the verdicts, they would have blamed all the rioting shit on us.” T-Bone, another member, said, “When the riots was going on...I got [our new] tape playing in my car, not realizing that all the while the tape is going along narrating what I’m seeing.”²⁴

The government did not fully acknowledge the structural causes for the riots that many gangsta rappers proposed, and did not view the riots as a signal that significant changes needed to be made in the federal approach to disadvantages neighborhoods. President Bush responded to the riots in his national address, and cast the riots as an impetuous bout of racial violence: “What we saw last night and the night before in Los Angeles is not about civil rights. It’s not about the great cause of equality that all Americans must uphold. It’s not a message of protest. It’s been the brutality of a mob, pure and simple.” Moreover, hope that controversy over the riots would lead to positive change was short lasting. According to the *New York Times*, the federal government initially vowed to invest in impoverished neighborhoods to solve some of the underlying issues that had led to the riots, but only made vague promises of an “action agenda to bring hope and opportunity back to our inner cities.” Moreover, this action agenda included many policies based on racial profiling, consequently disadvantaging young minority youth to an even greater degree.²⁵

The riots did put a public spotlight on misconduct by the LAPD and other police departments throughout the nation. The LAPD struggled to refute accusations of being an inherently racist institution. In a public statement aired by *ABC News*, LAPD Chief officer Daryl Gates officially admitted that policemen struck King with batons

²⁴ Big Syke, quoted in: Ibidem, 270 (quote); Shorty, quoted in: Cross, Ibidem, 236 (first quote); T-Bone, quoted in: Ibidem, 236 (second quote).

²⁵ TV-PG, “Bush on Los Angeles Riots,” *History.com* Video, 1:40. May 1, 1992, <http://www.history.com/speeches/bush-on-los-angeles-riots#bush-on-los-angeles-riots> (first quote); Andrew Rosenthal, “Bush Pledges Help to Riot-Torn Area: Ends Tour Offering Sympathy and \$19 Million in Help,” *The New York Times*, May 9, 1992, p. 1 & 10 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers) (second quote).

“between 53 and 56 times,” and kicked him seven times. However, in the same broadcast, Gates called the LAPD a “model department.” The LAPD additionally claimed that the tape of the Rodney King beating was “a misleading picture of reality.” During and after the trial however, controversy over the LAPD’s supposed racism continued. In a statement following the trial, officer Laurence Powell, who was involved in the beating, said that the riots appeared “right out of gorillas in the mist,” and he was publically chastised for comparing African Americans to gorillas.²⁶

Even though gangsta rappers continued to speak out against police misconduct in their music and public statements, gangsta rap actually guided the LAPD in their official approach to crime in Los Angeles. According to Elizabeth Grant, the LAPD used notions of crime constructed in gangsta rap, as well as song such as “Cop Killer,” to legitimize and design special police action against Compton residents. The idea that gangsta rappers represented a demographic of pitiless murderers justified a harsher approach to minority communities. Over the course of the 1990s, the LAPD increasingly militarized to protect itself in its war on gangs and drugs, and focused primarily on poor, minority residents. In fact, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the LAPD was one of the first forces to use the war on drugs as an incentive to create the “warrior cop.”²⁷

²⁶ Johnny Faragher, “Rodney King Tape on National News.flv,” *Youtube* Video (1:32), 15 Nov. 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SW1ZDIXiuS4&list=PL7F3E7CEC8B653197> (0:45) (first quote); *Ibidem*, (1:26) (second quote); Soja, *Los Angeles, 1965-1992*, 459 (third quote); Rebecca Rissman, *Rodney King and the L.A. Riots*, (ABDO Publishing Company: Minneapolis, 2014), 55 (fourth quote).

²⁷ Elizabeth Grant, “Gangsta Rap, the War on Drugs and the Location of African-American Identity in Los Angeles, 1988-92,” *European Journal of American Culture* 21.1 (2002): 4, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15; Chevingy, *Edge of the Knife*, 32, 37; Radley Balko, “Rise of the Warrior Cop: Is it time to reconsider the militarization of American policing?” *The Wallstreet Journal*, August 7, 2013, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323848804578608040780519904> (quote).

*The Message*²⁸

The riots, the continued disenfranchisement of young minority men, and the intensification of the war on drugs became popular topics for gangsta rappers during the 1990s. Multiple gangsta rap songs specifically commented on the riots and new crime laws. Ice Cube's "Three Strikes and You're In" from 1998 for example, comments on the Three Strikes laws: "I gots to root for my homeboys / If they don't win it's a shame / Cuz it's one-two-three strikes you in / Twenty-five years of pain."²⁹

Some artists used audio excerpts of news coverage and political speeches as preludes or interludes, framing their rap as a counternarrative. In his 1993 song "We Had to Tear this Motherf*cker Up," Ice Cube included audio snippets of politicians and news reporters speaking about the riots and the Rodney King verdict. In response, Ice Cube raps: "I told you all what happened and you heard it, read it / But all you could call me was anti-semitic...Niggas had to break you off somethin', give Bush a push / But your national guard ain't hard / You had to get Rodney to stop me cos you know what? / We woulda teared this muthafucka up."³⁰

Similarly, Dr. Dre interspersed his 1992 song "The Day the Niggaz Took Over" with audio-excerpts of mainstream news reports and speeches by black men. One fragment consists of an unidentified man saying, "Nobody told us today, in other words, you're still a slave. No matter how much money you got, you still ain't shit." News reporters are heard saying, "They have started fires down at the end of the street," and "Some of the crowd is throwing things at the officers." Throughout this collaged conversation, Dr. Dre and his crew share their thoughts on the matter: "Ya

²⁸ Dr. Dre, *The Message*, Mary J. Blige, Rell, © 1999 by Interscope Records, B000023VR6, Compact Disc.

²⁹ Ice Cube, "Three Strikes You In Lyrics," accessed 6 November, 2014, <http://rap.genius.com/Ice-cube-three-strikes-you-in-lyrics> (quote).

³⁰ HozCube Nas, "Ice Cube - We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up (HD)," *YouTube* Video, January 13, 2012, 4:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8V66bxvM2Q> (quotes).

see when niggas get together they get mad cuz they can't fade us / Like my niggas from South Central, Los Angeles / They find that they couldn't handle us...Let's jump off in Compton so I gots ta get my loot on...I got my finger on the trigger so niggaz wonder why / But livin in the city it's do-or-die."³¹

However, even though Dr. Dre and Ice Cube framed their lyrics as a counternarrative to the mainstream media, they still effectively affirmed existing stereotypes of black violence and anger. This paradox made it difficult to determine whether rappers refuted media bias of young Compton residents, or whether they legitimized America's fear of racial violence. According to Robin D. Kelley, the Los Angeles riots merely affirmed that gangsta rap offered a unique view on the "criminalization of black youth." Yet, this "unique view" mostly seemed to provide an interesting twist on the topic for the mainstream media, and did not lead to any significant action to solve the underlying issues that gangsta rappers argued had caused the riots. Thus, at the same time that gangsta rappers were legitimized as representatives of disadvantaged neighborhoods, they seemed to legitimize claims that the riots were an example of the dangers of uncurbed racial rage.³²

*Endangered Species*³³

Even though the tough stance on disadvantaged neighborhoods and "inner-city" crime might seem like a white-versus-black issue, some influential African Americans actively supported the government's strident approach to poor, minority youth. Some middle and upper class blacks feared that the criminality of young blacks might threaten the virtuous standing of "black culture" in society. Some upper class African

³¹ Younggangsta260, "Dr. Dre – 04 – The Chronic – The Day The Niggaz Took Over," *YouTube* Video, January 1, 2008, 4:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPbdWuBHIEw> (quotes).

³² Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 138; Kelley, *Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics*, 118 (quote).

³³ Ice Cube, *Endangered Species*, Chuck D, © 1990 by Priority Records, B000003B6X, Compact Disc.

Americans publically argued that young blacks might have to perish to allow for the improvement of the African-American community as a whole, which would require increased police force. During an interview with a San Francisco magazine, African-American sociologist Harry Edwards argued that poor black youths were incorrigibly criminal and might have to be “sacrificed” to cleanse society from evil. This statement suggests that the belief in the criminalized, negative image of black youth was not only instructed by race, but also by class.³⁴

However, as the situation of poor minority youth became increasingly perilous, black leaders became more concerned about the role gangsta rappers played as representatives of the African-American community. After the Civil Rights movement, gangsta rappers were the first African Americans to have such a significant platform to influence society. At a seminar at Howard University in 1987, the likes of Bill Stepany, Amiri Bakara and James Mtume argued that gangsta rappers should step up as the new leaders of African-American revolution. Some were skeptical about the stronghold that gangsta rappers had over the popular image of African Americans, and they were worried by the ways in which the image of gangsta rappers was used in American politics. However, they could not deny that gangsta rappers were more closely affiliated with disadvantaged young black men than any existing black political leader. Most of them agreed that gangsta rappers should speak for this demographic; although they disagreed over the way they should go about it.³⁵

Some rappers actively tried to provide new ways of leadership through the hip-hop community. For example, rapper KRS One started the “Stop the Violence” movement in 1989, which reached out to minority youths and taught them that the violent label applied to them by society and glorified by gangsta rap could be shed.

³⁴ Ogbar, “Slouching Towards Bork,” 181; Harry Edwards, quoted in: Davis, *City of Quartz*, 274, 275, 291-292 (quote).

³⁵ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 275.

The *New York Times* argued that his “high-profile activism is one factor that sets [KRS One] apart from most of his fellow rappers.” According to Tricia Rose however, the aim of the movement was undermined by the fact that Stop the Violence based its philosophy on the idea that black youth were inherently violent to begin with, consequently affirming the stereotypes that the movement tried to overthrow.³⁶

*Always into Somethin’*³⁷

Gangsta rappers themselves additionally complicated the issue of stereotyped black crime with their own behavior. Many gangsta rappers were publically involved in criminal activities, which were widely covered in the media. Popular gangsta rappers’ public brushes with the law during the early 1990s suggested that rappers were generally not lawful citizens: Dr. Dre was accused of physically assaulting a female TV host who had insulted him, Tupac Shakur was arrested for sexual assault and shooting two policemen, and Snoop Doggy Dog was tried for murder.³⁸

The introduction of the 1993 NBC special on gangsta rap exemplifies the complex intersection of gangsta rap, representation and crime in American society during the 1990s. The show opened its special with the following prompt:

Not all music stars, as you know, are model citizens. Some have had run-ins with the law, that’s certainly nothing new, but now a few musicians have taken that to new heights, or

³⁶ Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 274; Peter Keepnews, “Rap Leads to Respectability and Academia for KRS One,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1989, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/17/arts/pop-jazz-rap-leads-to-respectability-and-academia-for-krs-one.html> (quote); Rose, *Black Noise*, 141.

³⁷ N.W.A., *Always Into Somethin’*, MC Ren, Dr. Dre, Admiral D., © 1991 by Ruthless/Priority Records, B00006JJ1P, Compact Disc.

³⁸ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 150, 156; Chuck Philips, “N.W.A’s Dr. Dre Target of Suit by Host of Rap Show,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1991, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-07-23/entertainment/ca-55_1_pop-lyrics; Neil Strauss, “The Pop Life: Snoop Doggy Dogg,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/02/movies/the-pop-life-699438.html>.

to new depths; committing crimes, ranging from sexual assault to murder. The arrest of three big-name rap stars recently, has intensified the debate over rap music itself. You may never have heard of some of these stars, but your kids have. They're heroes to a whole new generation.³⁹

In this short introduction, it is suggested that the criminal behavior of gangsta rappers is not only unsurprising, but is setting an example to America's youth. The popularity of gangsta rap, combined with its criminal image, is thus argued to threaten American society. The affirmation of the stereotypically criminal image of gangsta rappers simultaneously affirms negative stereotypes of young black youth and encourages the belief that gangsta rap, like black youth, should be policed.

Although it cannot be denied that some gangsta rappers committed serious crimes, some rappers argued that they were actively targeted by authorities and framed for crimes they did not commit, solely to affirm public stereotypes that they were incorrigible criminals. For example, rapper Tupac claimed that he was framed by police when he was charged with possession of a murder weapon after police searched his dressing room. Further more, even though Snoop Doggy Dogg was acquitted of his murder charges, his image as a dangerous criminal was solidified during his very public trial.⁴⁰

What's The Difference?⁴¹

Popular stereotypes, gangsta rappers' own criminal behavior, and the triumph of image over reality, severely complicated the discussion of gangsta rap. This frustrated

³⁹ OfficialGangstaMusik, "Report on Gangsta Rap (1993) (Rare Eazy-E Interview)" (quote).

⁴⁰ Reeves, *Somebody Scream!*, 156, 166-167.

⁴¹ Dr. Dre, *What's the Difference?*, Eminem, Xzibit, © 1999 by Interscope Records, B000023VR6, Compact Disc.

not only gangsta rappers, but anyone involved in the discussion. Because, if reality is enclosed in stereotypes, how reality be properly dealt with? This is a question that Jesse Jackson addressed during a televised interview in 1993, in which he cleverly addressed the complexity of the gangsta rap discussion while venting his own frustration on the matter:

Indeed these rap artists do have a responsibility. Those who pay them have a responsibility. But those who set the context have an even greater responsibility. If there was not such easy access to guns, and drugs, and so much unemployment, and so much abandonment, then rap would be abstract. The pain for reality is that the rapping is real. And somehow I get the impression that basic, white mass media wants to focus on rap and not on reality. And I say, if you're going to cover violence, cover reality, not just rap. Rap is an extension of the culture. Let's break up the violence in the culture...But don't just pick and choose...to fit me on one side and the rappers on the other. These are our children in trouble, and they are in pain.⁴²

Jackson's speech accurately touches upon the problems that underlie, and are caused by, the intersection of the public reaction to gangsta rap and the public understanding of the demographic that gangsta rap represented. Rap was an abstraction of issues that were not abstract, which severely complicated an honest conversation about the issues that gangsta rappers addressed.

Despite the fact that gangsta rap triggered a public conversation about several delicate issues in American society, it did not necessarily help to solve the inequalities that gangsta rap addressed. Gangsta rappers' position as representatives of disadvantaged black youth allowed them to publically share their opinions on racial

⁴² Jesse Jackson, in: OfficialGangstaMusik, "Report on Gangsta Rap (1993) (Rare Eazy-E Interview)" (quote).

and economic inequality, police brutality, and discriminatory crime policies. Gangsta rap was one of the ways in which frustration over the effect of significant racial, generational and class-based schisms in 1990s America was voiced. However, it can be debated whether gangsta rap helped generate a constructive discussion regarding those schism and their effects. It could even be argued that gangsta rap aggravated the social wrongs it decried. The public conversation triggered by gangsta rap stranded in a tug-of-war over what gangsta rap meant, and whether or not gangsta rap itself posed a danger to society. As the public discussion of gangsta rap and the social demographic that it represented continued during the 1990s, the distinction between reality and fantasy became increasingly blurred, which effectively thwarted gangsta rap's power to ignite positive social change.

In the end, the national moral panic over gangsta rap severely complicated an honest discussion over who was responsible for some of the most pressing social problems in American society. Campaigns against gangsta rap had emphasized gangsta rap's negative extremities, and had solidified the image of gangsta rap as dangerous to society. Gangsta rap came to symbolize the issues it addressed, and the music itself was argued to cause police brutality, violence, drug problems, and more. As such, attacks on gangsta rap falsely seemed to be attacks on the social, political economic and racial issues it decried. A tough stance on gangsta rap could seemingly equal a tough stance on crime, making the issue appear much less complicated than it really was. The controversy over gangsta rap eventually died down, but the problems that gangsta rap had addressed were not solved. Two decades later, gangsta rappers are still rapping the same song.

Conclusion

*Ain't a Damn Thing Changed*¹

The existing scholarly debate on gangsta rap primarily exists as a tug-of-war over meanings and values, similar to the public discussion of gangsta rap during the 1990s. Different characteristics of gangsta rap are either cast as beneficial or obstructive to gangsta rap's value as a form of cultural protest, or are dismissed as inherently problematic. Gangsta rap's stereotypical image as black, violent, criminal and misogynistic, has led many scholars to investigate the roots¹ of its blackness, its depiction of violence and crime, its depiction of life in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and the source of its misogyny. Consequently, most scholarly research of gangsta rap offers different views on and explanation of gangsta rap's most controversial characteristics. Notably, little research includes or specifically focuses on the role of those characteristics within the public discussion of gangsta rap.

However, the meaning of gangsta rap lies not only within the music itself, but also within the public reception of the music. Especially when gangsta rap is treated as a form of social or political protest, the interpretation and valuation of gangsta rap by the American public needs to be taken into account. Moreover, the relationship between gangsta rap and American politics has to be explored from both sides to be properly understood: not only gangsta rap's position towards American politics, but also the political response to gangsta rap. Protest always engages in a conversation, and to understand the dynamics and implications of that conversation, the importance of both the call and the response needs to be acknowledged.

¹ Ice-T, *Ain't A Damn Thing Changed*, © 1993 by EMI Records, B00FY3IJIS, Compact Disc.

This study offers a valuable contribution to existing scholarly research by taking a more holistic approach to the discourse surrounding gangsta rap. Instead of attempting to prove the accuracy or inaccuracy of stereotypical labels commonly ascribed to gangsta rap, this study explores how those stereotypical labels functioned within the public and scholarly discussion of gangsta rap, and how the resulting discourse affected the public understanding of both gangsta rap and the social demographic that the music represented. At the hand of activism against and the public discussion of gangsta rap in 1990s' America, this study explores how different groups and individuals ascribed different meanings to gangsta rap, which helps to identify the various ways in which the definition of gangsta rap and the public perception of the demographic group that gangsta rap represented converged. Recognition of this convergence, especially concerning a simultaneously popular and condemned product like gangsta rap, allows for a unique perspective on the ways in which issues regarding social and economic inequality, race and crime are discussed in American society. Moreover, this study's approach permits a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which gangsta rap challenged American society, including the limitations of that challenge. Consequently, important steps are taken towards identifying the limitations of cultural products as a form of political or social protest.

The loud message that gangsta rap emitted from Compton during the late 1980s shook up the entire nation. Gangsta rap confronted America with the fact that decades of structural neglect of minority neighborhoods had spawned a generation of frustrated youth that was fed up with mainstream society and anyone who wronged them. As a musical style emergent from the most impoverished and disadvantaged neighborhoods of America, gangsta rap gave voice to a social demographic that had

long been ignored. Through explicit depictions of police violence, drug use, gang banging, and sexual escapades, gangsta rappers offered a fantastical and hyperrealistic window into life in neighborhoods like Compton, Los Angeles.

The intensity of the music was met with an equally intense backlash, and with a fan base growing as rapidly as anti-gangsta rap campaigns, gangsta rap quickly became one of the most contested and widely discussed popular music styles of the century. As such, gangsta rap tested America's capability to simultaneously embrace and battle its inner demons. However, gangsta rap's critique on social and political injustice was quickly overshadowed by controversy over its explicit nature and misogynist values. Even if gangsta rappers insisted that their music should be called "reality rap," it was quickly given the label of "gangsta," including all the negative stereotypes that came with it. The music's misogyny, its glorification of guns and drugs, and the omnipresence of violence in gangsta rap were all heavily drawn out in the public discussion of and campaigns against the music.

The public controversy over gangsta raps' characteristics and imagery, whether intended or not, took away from a public acknowledgement of the pressing social injustices in America's poorest neighborhoods voiced by gangsta rap. Regardless of whether gangsta rappers rapped about reality, it was a reality divergent from that of the majority of the American and much of the wealthier African-American community. Despite the heated public debate about gangsta rap, America was not ready to accept the realities prophesied by gangsta rap as undeniable truths. Individuals and groups from many different social and ethnic backgrounds – conservative and liberal politicians, black religious and political leaders, feminists, parents, scholars, and more – all found distinct reasons to protest the music instead of encouraging recognition of its underlying message. Campaigns against gangsta rap

were so extensive and striking that they dominated much of the discourse surrounding gangsta rap. Even though none of the anti-gangsta rap campaigns of the late 1980s and 1990s succeeded in truly silencing gangsta rap, they did cast gangsta rap as an inherently black, criminal and potentially dangerous cultural product. Those who publicly protested gangsta rap represented extremes in American society, but the image of gangsta rap as representative of dangerous, black criminals did influence society's perception of both gangsta rap and the social demographic that it represented.

Gangsta rapper's position as representatives of young black men from disadvantaged neighborhoods was incredibly complex and problematic. At times, for example after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, gangsta rappers were viewed as experts on racial and political injustices. However, gangsta rap's controversial reputation could also be used to reaffirm negative stereotypes of America's poor minority population. Several politicians were able to use gangsta rap's controversy to influence potential voters. Moreover, the introduction of tougher crime laws that disproportionately affected minority youth relied on the popular image of crime as primarily black and male. Since many gangsta rappers appropriated existing stereotypes of black criminality, and many of them were publically accused of actual crimes, they effectively affirmed those stereotypes that negatively impacted the demographic for which they spoke. Consequently, public confusion over whether or not gangsta rap harmed society, included confusion over the ways in which gangsta rap represented reality.

A closer look at the multifarious opposition to gangsta rap and its problematic representation of the young black generation that grew up in America's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, not only exposes limits within scholarly research of

gangsta rap's characteristics, but also exposes limits in the public discussion of the societal issues that gangsta rappers addressed. Acknowledgement of these limits calls for new research into the complex ways in which gangsta rap challenged American society, and how America responded to that challenge. It is striking that such disparate groups and individuals could unite in their efforts to fight gangsta rap, but that similar co-operation and passion was absent when it came to battling the some of the issues that gangsta rap addressed, such as police brutality, the destructive effects of social, racial and economic inequality, and skewed gender relationships. The underlying reasons for this disparity deserve closer examination.

A better understanding of limitations in the public discussion of the societal issues that gangsta rap addressed could help to explain why these issues are still plaguing America. Attacks on gangsta rap eventually died down, but the sensitive issues that dominated most gangsta rap narratives, are still at the center of public controversies today. Recent unrest over the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner – unarmed black men who died at the hands of white police officers – raises new questions about America's understanding of crime and justice, about racial profiling, about police misconduct, and about the ways in which ideas regarding race, class, and criminality influence the American justice system. The failure to indict any of the responsible police officers has outraged countless Americans, and has signaled peaceful and violent protests all over the country. At recent protests, people still chant N.W.A.'s anthem "Fuck the Police," which shows that gangsta raps' original sentiment is still very much alive. Moreover, such events demonstrate that in

American society, black masculinity is still equated with inherent criminality, and that this equation can have devastating results.²

Moreover, gangsta rap itself is still treated as signifying gangsta rapper's violent nature. In fact, gangsta rap is even used as evidence against gangsta rappers in court. In January of 2014, the *New York Times* reported that gangsta rap lyrics were used as evidence of the inherent aggression of artists and commitment of specific crimes in murder trials.³ In August 2014, *The Washington Post* reported that "the New Jersey Supreme Court rule[d]...that rap lyrics were wrongfully used as evidence in an attempted-murder trial." These incidents show that the line between reality and fantasy in gangsta rap is still not clearly drawn, and that the aggression of gangsta rap is still viewed as representative of the violent nature of gangsta rap artists.⁴

Although gangsta rap may have had limited power to redefine what it means to be black, male and poor in America, a better understanding of why this power was limited can help to explain why some of the issues that gangsta rap addressed are still a reality in America two decades later. This understanding cannot be realized without taking into account how gangsta rap was understood to represent a danger to society

² Larry Buchanan, Ford Fessenden, Haeyoun Park, Alicia Parlapiano and Tim Wallace, "What Happened in Ferguson?" *The New York Times*, last updated August 22, 2014, accessed November 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html>; Joseph Goldstein and Nate Schweber, "Man's Death After Chokehold Raises Old Issue for the Police," *The New York Times*, July 14, 2014, accessed November 21, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/nyregion/staten-island-man-dies-after-he-is-put-in-chokehold-during-arrest.html?_r=0; The editorial board, "A Search for Justice in the Eric Garner Case," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2014, accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/opinion/new-inquiry-needed-on-eric-garners-death.html>; Paul Lewis and Jon Swaine, "Ferguson Ablaze after Michael Brown Verdict: 'This is a War Zone Now,'" *The Guardian*, 25 November, 2014, accessed December 3, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/25/-sp-ferguson-ablaze-michael-brown-verdict-war-zone>.

³ Erik Nielson and Charis E. Kubrin, "Rap Lyrics on Trial," *The New York Times*, 13 January 2014, accessed November 11, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/14/opinion/rap-lyrics-on-trial.html?_r=0.

⁴ Niraj Chokshi, "Here's the New Jersey Supreme Court 'Gangster Rap' Ruling You've Been Waiting For," *The Washington Post*, 5 August, 2014, accessed November 11, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/08/05/the-new-jersey-supreme-court-rules-on-using-rap-lyrics-as-evidence-for-the-second-time/>.

at the same time that it represented black male youth. Moreover, it needs to be recognized that opposition to gangsta rap and the support of harsher judicial treatment of minority youth existed in all layers of society. As such, the conversation extends beyond a discussion of white privilege and black disadvantage, into a discussion of disparities in class, power and the omnipresent biased perception of certain groups in American society. It is a conversation that extends beyond the music, and it is a conversation that still needs to take place.

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