

WOMEN RAPPERS AND THE NEOLIBERAL POLITICS OF
INDIFFERENCE: REEVALUATING THE RACIAL
AND SEXUAL POLITICS OF LOS ANGELES
GANGSTA RAP IN THE EARLY 1990s

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the School of Music and Dance
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

September 2017

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Women Rappers and Neoliberal Indifference: Reevaluating the Racial and Sexual Politics of Los Angeles Gangsta Rap in the Early 1990s

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Degree awarded September 2017

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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September 2017

Title: Women Rappers and Neoliberal Indifference: Reevaluating the Racial and Sexual Politics of Gangsta Rap in the Early 1988-1994

This thesis asks why women gangsta rappers have been excluded from virtually all academic and popular discourses about the genre. While ‘positive’ and ‘empowering’ New York-based female rappers in the late 80s and 90s are often referenced by those concerned with gangsta rap’s misogynistic tendencies, women rappers in Los Angeles who performed alongside male gangsta rappers, were represented on labels managed by gangsta rappers, and were otherwise self-consciously engaging in the gangsta rap style are almost never acknowledged by either the genre’s defenders or detractors. By interrogating this discursive absence, I reevaluate the neoliberal sexual and racial politics of gangsta rap’s censorship discourse and interrogate the rhetorical and representational strategies deployed by female gangsta rappers such as Lady of Rage, Bo\$\$, NiNi X, Menajhtwa, H.W.A., and Yo-Yo to both contest misogyny and express coalitional affinity with their male counterparts from within the genre itself.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Professor Loren Kajikawa for his assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. In addition, special thanks are due to my committee members, Professors Steve Rogers and Eduardo Wolf, for providing invaluable insight I worked to transform my draft into a final manuscript. I also would like to thank my graduate cohort, Ashley Merriner and Kevin Whitman, for allowing me to workshop my ideas and for inspiring me with their own projects.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Structural Overview.....	12
II. THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF GANGSTA RAP DISCOURSE	19
Defining and Disciplining Gangsta Rap.....	33
Gangsta Rap and the Problem of Influence: The Case of Bo\$\$.....	52
“Violence is an Epidemic in the Country”: The Congressional Hearings on Gangsta Rap.....	73
Heteropatriarchy and the Black Family: The Neoliberal Sexual Politics of Gangsta Rap Discourse.....	88
Too Misogynistic, Not Heteropatriarchal: The Sexual Politics of Gangsta Rap.....	99
III. WOMEN RAPPERS AND THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF GANGSTA RAP	103
Spit Her Name: The Purpose of Gangsta Rap Feminism.....	103
Building a Gangsta Rap Feminist Framework: Bo\$\$, Menajahtwa, and NiNi X.....	134
Setting the Stage: The 2 Live Crew Obscenity Hearings	139
The Politics of “Livin’ In a Hoe House”: The Case of H.W.A.....	162
IV. CONCLUSION.....	174

Chapter	Page
Gangsta Rap’s ‘Erotics’	180
From Battle of the Sexes to Bonnie and Clyde: Yo-Yo’s Collaborations with Ice Cube.....	184
Won’t Stop (Beyoncé ft. Kendrick Lamar): The BET Awards and the Future of the Gangsta Style.....	197
REFERENCES CITED.....	209

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Two panels from the comic accompanying Snoop Doggy Dogg's debut album <i>Doggy Style</i>	4
2.1. Front cover of <i>Time Magazine</i> on August 3rd, 1993.....	55
2.2. Album cover of <i>Born Gangstaz</i> by Bo\$\$.....	66
3. Album cover of H.W.A.'s <i>Livin' In a Hoe House</i>	164
4.1. Throwing a raider out of the desert rover from the music video for "California Love".....	183
4.2. A party on the streets of L.A. consisting of men and women wearing the colors of both the Bloods and the Crips from the music video for "Piru Love".....	184
4.3. First four paragraphs of the call-to-action posted on the front page of beyonce.com on July 7, 2016.....	203
4.4. Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar on stage during the final chorus of "Freedom" at the 2016 BET Awards.....	206

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis contributes to the current scholarship on Los Angeles gangsta rap of the late 1980s and early 1990s by asking why women gangsta rappers have been excluded from virtually all academic and popular discourses about the genre. While ‘positive’ and ‘empowering’ women rappers of the late 80s and 90s such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and others are often referenced by those concerned with gangsta rap’s misogynistic tendencies, women rappers in Los Angeles who performed alongside male gangsta rappers, were represented on labels managed by gangsta rappers, and were otherwise self-consciously engaging in the gangsta rap style are almost never acknowledged by either the genre’s defenders or detractors. Considering that so much of the discourse on the genre is centered on identifying and politicizing its problematic sexual politics, it seems strange that the contributions of women gangsta rappers have been ignored.

In fact, the silence about women gangsta rappers contrasts sharply with the relative loudness of their voices in prominent and controversial gangsta rap albums by men and on virtually every early independent gangsta rap label, suggesting that the assumption that gangsta rap is a fundamentally male field is based on a critical misreading of the genre. For example, Snoop Doggy Dogg’s 1993 album *Doggy Style*, was criticized by the president of the National Political Congress of Black Women, C. Delores Tucker, during both of the two congressional hearings about gangsta rap 1994. To the Senate Subcommittee on

Juvenile Justice, Tucker testified that the graphic art of a comic sold with the album was pornographic to the extent that “if the filth that is depicted in these cartoons is not obscene, then I submit that nothing is obscene.”¹ To the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Tucker took her argument further, referring to Snoop’s music to argue that it represents an existential threat to black community and identity:

Even if it comes out of our own mouths, the gangsta rap and misogynist lyrics that glorify violence and denigrate women is nothing more than pornographic smut. And with the release of Snoop Doggy Dogg’s debut album, “Doggystyle”, that includes the graphic artwork that is in the room here today that is sold with it. Because this pornographic smut is in the hands of our children, it coerces, influences, encourages and motivated our youth to commit violent behavior, to use drugs and abuse women through demeaning sex acts. The reality of the 1990s is that the greatest fear in the African American community does not come from earthquake, floods or fires, but from violence, the kind of violence that has already transformed our communities and schools into war zones where children are dodging bullets instead of balls, and planning their own funerals.²

Yet, for all the carnivalesque sexual depravity celebrated in Snoop Doggy Dogg’s music, the first rapper heard on his album is actually not Snoop Dogg but Lady of Rage, who opens “G-Funk Intro” with a deft verse identifying herself as Snoop’s collaborator while describing herself “sippin’ on Tanqueray with my mind on my money and my mouth fulla gan-jay.” Rage’s verse is structurally significant and outlines the major themes explored by Snoop Dogg in the rest of his album. These

¹ Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*, 103rd cong., 2nd sess., February 23rd, 1994, 12.

² Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Music Lyrics and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 11 and May 5, 1994, 5.

two lines serve as the basis for the refrain “with my mind on my money, and my money on my mind” of Snoop’s single “Gin and Juice,” and her reference to both smoking chronic and drinking gin is alluded to in a verse on this track where Snoop describes when his “homie Dr. Dre came through with a gang of Tanqueray and a fat ass J of some bubonic chronic.” In this sense, Lady of Rage situates herself alongside Snoop and Dr. Dre comfortably among the rest of the posse, the Dogg Pound.

Taking Lady of Rage’s verse in “G Funk-Intro” and role within the imagined world depicted in the album seriously opens another possible way to think of gangsta rap’s sexual politics. *Doggystyle*’s enduring popularity along gender lines suggests that Snoop’s project was concerned with exploring the possibility for young black men and women to negotiate sexual difference by politically and socially identifying with one another, which is a theme consistently explored throughout the deeply collaborative album. Even in the accompanying comic which so offended Tucker, while indeed vulgar in its depiction of a scantily-clad cartoon “ho” who gets kicked out of Snoop’s “Dogg House” for providing bad marijuana, the woman in question is valued not as sexual currency but for her ability to provide ganja. The main plot of the comic involves cartoon renderings of Snoop, the ‘hoe,’ and collaborator C-Style attempting to come together to smoke, with the central conflict being a standup between C-Style and the militarized police force, which delays C-Style from being able to bring rolling paper to the House. If there is a message to take away from the comic, it is that the Dogg Pound is a gathering grounds for criminal stereotypes of young black

urban social rejects – gangsters, hustlers, ‘hos’, and others – whose pursuit of simple and harmless pleasures (with marijuana being a safer alternative to the ravages of crack) leads to dangerous encounters with authority.

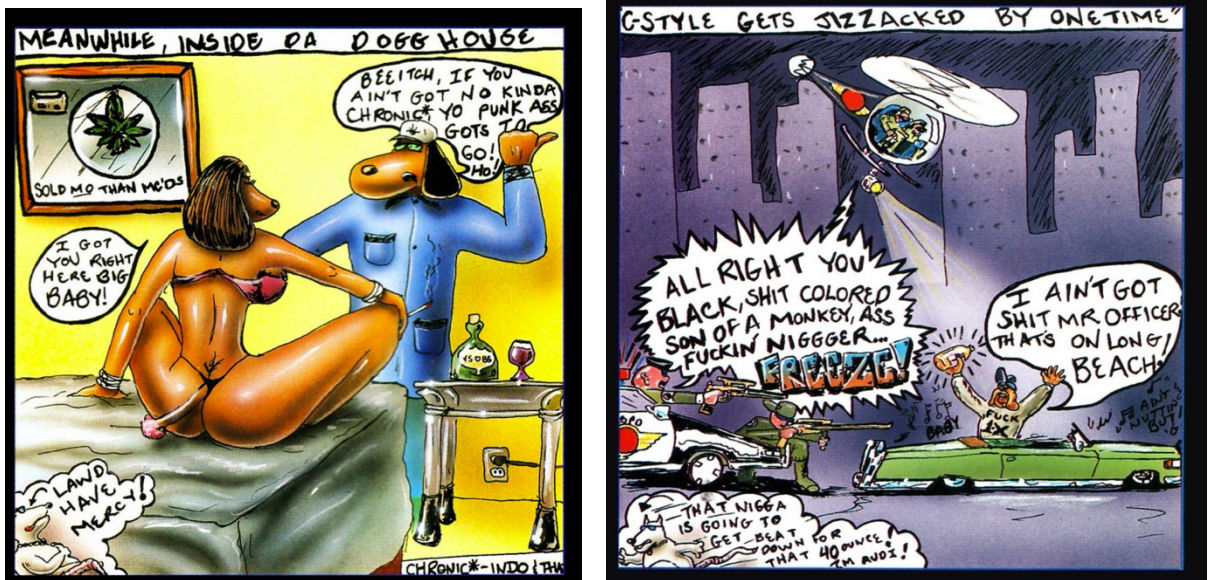


Figure 1 – Two panels from the comic which accompanied Snoop Doggy Dogg’s debut album *Doggy Style*

The prevalence of sexualized and problematic renderings of black women have long been one of the most contentious elements of gangsta rap, and are often read as an element of the genre that ultimately undermines the cogency of its political critique. Yet, as I will argue in this thesis, this type of reading does not account for how women rappers have entered the fray. Instead, they have been erased within the censorship-driven discourse that preempted the genre’s popular ascent and has structured popular knowledge about the genre around its most controversial – and censorable – aspects. Because of this, women gangsta rappers like Lady of Rage have long ‘hidden in plain sight’ such that their voices and self-representations have been ignored in controversial gangsta rap albums, songs, and

labels, even when these very sites are scrutinized. In fact, there are no major male gangsta rappers of the early Los Angeles scene, which I am loosely identifying as occurring between 1987-1994, who have not closely collaborated with women counterparts. Because of this, it is problematic to construct an analysis of gangsta rap's generalized sexual politics based on face-value readings of selected lyrics of selected songs without working to undo the erasure of women rappers who contribute to the genre.

In order to write women back in to the discussion of gangsta rap, I consider their displacement and erasure as an important aspect of gangsta rap's politics, and interrogate the construction of the censorship frame that continues to structure discourse about gangsta rap. As feminist and other critical analyses of canon demonstrate, power and authority govern the construction of knowledge about the defining works that constitute a musical genre.³ As Robin D.G. Kelley demonstrates, the notion that gangsta rap is a genre that glorifies gun and gang violence ignores the fact that gangsta rap is actually a self-conscious critique of the material conditions critics claim that the genre glorifies.⁴ While gangsta rap's defenders have long been wary of the extent that censoring the genre on grounds of its obscenity ultimately works to silence and nullify its oppositional political critique, these scholars have been hesitant to extend this defense to the genre's sexism.

³ See, for example, Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁴ Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

For example, after the aforementioned congressional hearings, rap historian and feminist Tricia Rose published a response in *USA Today* criticizing the “empty moral grandstanding by politicians unable and unwilling to tackle the real problems that plague America’s cities and their poorest black children.” In this article, she accuses the anti-gangsta rap discourse for failing to take the urban crime epidemic that gangsta rap songs often depict seriously, and for choosing instead to suppress one of the only forms of media that provides an honest rendering of the conditions ravaging poor black communities. However, while Rose argues that its depictions of gang lifestyles and gun violence are the very means that artists are able to levy a structural critique in their music, she describes the criticisms of its sexist imagery as merely “profoundly shallow readings” that fail to capture that range of expression found in gangsta rap. Yet, Rose does not give a similarly reflexive reading of gangsta rap’s sexual politics, but rather suggests that the sexist elements in sexist rap songs are taken out of context in order to “criminalize hip hop as the cultural example of a criminal way of thinking.” She ends by reaffirming the notion that gangsta rap is a genre populated by men, writing “in this fearful fantasy, hip hop style (or whatever style young black men create and adopt) becomes a code for criminal behavior, and censoring the music begins to look more and more like fighting crime.”⁵

Focusing on how the misinterpreting gangsta rap can reinforce ideologies that criminalize black male behavior, Rose centers her analysis on the censorship discourse about gangsta rap, and not gangsta rap itself. In fact, in her book *Black*

⁵ Tricia Rose, “Rap Music and the Demonization of Young Black Males,” *USA Today*, May 1994.

Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America published earlier the same year as the congressional hearings and her published response, she notes that the transmission of rap from New York to the West Coast has resulted in the emergence a “new group of female gangsta rappers” including Los Angeles-based Boss, and New York-based Hurrigan Gloria and Nikki D.⁶ However, she abandons this optimism in order to tackle the criminalizing discourse targeting men in her later response to the criminalizing censorship discourse on gangsta rap that she identifies as a means of targeting black men in order to support prison growth.

Other scholars and advocates who respond to this criticism of gangsta rap similarly focus on music produced by men and render women rappers irrelevant and secondary. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley, for example, suggests that the misogyny of gangsta rap should be seen as a problematic, yet forgivable, quality of the genre that defines the limits of its critique. While he criticizes the media’s representation of gangsta rap as an example of criminal behavior that implies the need to increase police presence in Los Angeles, he acknowledges that “its masculinist emphasis and pimp-inspired vitriol toward women are central” to the genre, and suggests that the its misogyny is a result of the emasculating and disempowering social existence young black men experience in the inner city.⁷ Kelley, like Rose, suggests that the criticisms of gangsta rap’s sexism are based on selective readings that are meant to justify the criminalization and control over

⁶ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994), 59.

⁷ Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 185.

poor black men. In this regard, gangsta rap's sexism is 'less bad' and 'less powerful' than the hegemonic anti-crime measures advocated by its critics.

The criminalizing censorship discourse has resulted in gangsta rap being abstracted and defined for all intents and purposes as a genre composed entirely of young men expressing their dissatisfaction at, and thus critiquing, an oppressive system that renders them vulnerable. I believe that Kelley and others find themselves stuck in an important critical contradiction; while they acknowledge that gangsta rap's critics are invested in interpreting gangsta rap as an expression of pathological and criminal urban black male hypermasculinity in order to suppress young urban black men, they tend to accept that there is in fact a pathological and distinct version of urban black male hypermasculinity intrinsically expressed in gangsta rap. The defense of gangsta rap then becomes a polemical one about the cause of and appropriate response to pathological black male behavior that divides along traditional progressive and conservative lines. The definition of gangsta rap remains unchanged, and women rappers remain irrelevant.

Because these defenses do not interrogate how and why women rappers have been excised from the genre during this process, they are unable to adequately respond to criticisms about its sexual politics. As I will attempt to show, however, the early Los Angeles gangsta rap scene's sexual politics are much more nuanced and complex than has been previously acknowledged. While expressions of hypermasculinity and misogynistic utterances and standpoints are indeed as prevalent in gangsta rap as depictions of murders, drug dealing,

hustling, and gang banging, I believe it is a mistake to assume to distinguish how we read these two forms of violence because of an assumed double-consciousness. When the conversations taking place between women and male gangsta rappers are obscured, it becomes impossible to see how gangsta rap can indeed be a site where relationships based on gender or sexual difference can contested and renegotiated. Because of this, one of the central ironies of the censorship discourse that criticizes gangsta rap because of its overt sexism is that it isolates the most toxic examples of hypermasculine expression from the critical responses these expressions inevitably generate, thus giving a primacy and final word to these harmful ideologies that they did not otherwise enjoy.

In fact, the way that the censorship discourse on gangsta rap amplifies the genre's power to offend is central to the sexual politics that underlie the process of defining gangsta rap as a form of violence that does harm to both black communities and to white suburban youth. As a genre defined as deeply problematic during the culture wars of the 1990s, gangsta rap's core quality has become its status as a form of violence that contrasts with 'positive' or 'conscious' rap that speaks truth to power. While defenders have objected to this definition by showing that the gangsta rap does not glorify street violence, but critiques it, the problem of its sexist violence remains unresolved. This tension has lasted to the present day, in which the term has lost its descriptive geographic and historical specificity and has come to stand for the mindless misogyny of hip hop culture.

In a recent piece by white radical feminist activist and scholar Julie Bindel titled “Hip-Hop: the Sexism’s Gotta Stop” published in *Byline* in response to Gary F. Gray’s biopic on N.W.A. in 2015, she claims that gangsta rap invokes a contradiction within herself as “a radical feminist who has campaigned to end sexual violence and the misogyny that provokes it for 30-plus years, and [is] also a hip hop fan.” In this essay, she lays a sharp distinction between gangsta rap and hip hop, stating “I don’t want hip hop to die. I want to see an end to the gangsta rap and the lyrics filled with hate for women.” In making this claim, she chooses not to define gangsta rap as a reflection of life in post-industrial Los Angeles that emerged in the late 1980s, but rather locates the birth of gangsta rap in the 1990s and defines it as a style that formed when major record labels began buying out independent labels in order to impose a “monolithic negative stereotype of black men and women.” Contrasting the female-degrading gangsta rap with both ‘old-school’ New York acts like Grandmaster Flash and the Sugar Hill Gang as well as East Coast women rappers like Queen Latifah, Roxanne Shanté and Salt-N-Pepa, rap and gangsta rap are framed as diametrically opposed. Because rap music of the present so systemically degrades women, Bindel suggests that a sterilizing “revamp of the entire genre is necessary.”⁸

I suggest in this thesis that because gangsta rap’s definition of ‘rap as violence’ was constructed by its opponents who stood to profit from suppressive neoliberal measures like prison expansion and welfare reform, it is important to be critical of the performative impact this usage contributed to the criminalization

⁸ Julie Bindel, “Hip-Hop: The Sexism’s Gotta Stop,” *ByLine*, June 14, 2015. <https://www.byline.com/column/7/article/88>.

of black bodies in order to define them as apolitical, undisciplined, and prone to a unique form of black pathological hypermasculinity. While gangsta rap often does contain misogynistic lyrics that describe sexual violence, it is also the case that gangsta rap is uniquely prone to having these expressions come to signify an essential quality of the genre that requires suppressive intervention.

Just as it would be a mistake to suggest that all representations of gangbanging personae in gangsta rap are critical and oppositional and thus necessarily do not glamorize violence, it is also problematic to foreclose the possibility that all of gangsta rap's misogynistic representations are uncritical adherences to masculinist ideologies. But it is impossible to evaluate the extent that gangsta rap can be a response, rather than adherence, to sexist ideology without recognizing the work women played in shaping the genre.

This thesis is both a chance to introduce a previously unacknowledged body of music by women gangsta rappers into the scholarship as well as an attempt to interrogate the political implications of their absence from the gangsta rap canon. I therefore think this project as a deconstruction and a reconstruction of gangsta rap that begins with the question 'why don't we ever hear about women gangsta rappers,' and follows up with the question 'now that it is clear that they do exist and have from the start, why have they been made to appear insignificant in a genre so politicized for its sexist qualities,' and concludes with the question 'what changes about the meaning of gangsta rap if we refuse to completely remove women rappers from our account of the genre'?

Structural Overview

This thesis is composed of two main chapters and a conclusion which cumulatively represent my attempt at critically interrogating the construction of gangsta rap as a genre without women, as well as highlighting the music and representational strategies of women rappers in L.A. between 1988-1994. The two chapters of my thesis are guided by the questions ‘why have women rappers been left out of the gangsta rap canon?’ and the ‘what changes about our understanding of gangsta rap’s representational politics when they are reinserted?’ In order to answer these questions, Chapter III focuses on the suppressive discourse about gangsta rap itself, Chapter II on the role women played in the genre, and the Conclusion on ‘loving’ collaborations between male and female rappers. In this sense, the purpose of this thesis is to build a new critical framework for thinking about gangsta rap’s sexual and oppositional politics.

The main purpose of Chapter III is to critically distinguish the qualitative differences between ‘gangsta rap’ as a descriptive signifier as opposed to a pejorative one by interrogating the mainstream anti-gangsta rap discourse that emerged in the early 1990s. In the former sense, it stands for a complex cultural field emerging out of the postindustrial wreckage and neoliberal developments taking place within South Central Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. ‘Gangsta rap’ in this sense refers to the representational strategies deployed by gangsta rappers who adopt the voices of imagined personas in order to depict the reality of violence they are surrounded by. As a pejorative, ‘gangsta rap’ loses this specificity and can be used to stand for any form of violent or sexist rap whose

existence is a moral or cultural threat to the fabric of American society, especially insofar as it threatens to ideologically disorient the youth. Analyzing ‘gangsta rap’ as a descriptive term for a cultural system poses the challenge to develop an account of the genre that recognizes the conversations taking place within, between, and through gangsta rap labels, songs, and albums and put these conversations in relation to the external forces such as the economic and material conditions governing the lives of gangsta rappers as well as the market and discursive forces that create an economy that circulate and place value on these texts after they have been produced. This also allowed the violence and misogyny of gangsta rap to stand for populations of black urban populations in post-industrial sites like Los Angeles such that discourse about the ‘problem’ of gangsta rap mirrored the discourse about the ‘problem’ these post-industrial ‘surplus’ populations posed to the neoliberalization of the United States in the 1980s and 90s. In this regard, I suggest that it is important to recognize that the suppressive discourse about gangsta rap was structured by a neoliberal sexual politics that is distinct from the sexual politics of gangsta rap itself.

In Chapter III, I will attempt to account for the women who participated in the gangsta rap scene by using an intersectional critique to revisit the qualities assumed to be part of gangsta rap’s distinct representational politics. In particular, I will revisit the use of ‘signifying’ as an analytic in gangsta rap. The notion that rap’s often vulgar and obscene lyrics are actually an afro-centric form of double-voiced linguistic wordplay was introduced by Henry Luis Gates Jr. in response to

the obscenity trials of Miami bass group 2 Live Crew in 1989.⁹ The status of gangsta rap as an oppositional “signifying practice” in which the language, and thus social primacy, of whiteness is played with, criticized, rejected, and replaced has become central to scholarship on gangsta rap’s politics. In this framework, gangsta rap’s vulgarity is itself a fundamental part of the political work that it does because it performs a carnivalesque inversion of white supremacist social structures. While this interpretive frame gives an account of gangsta rap’s rejection of heteropatriarchal values qualities, I will refer to intersectional black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s critique of Gates to argue that this analytical approach is limited because it does not account for the difference between linguistic violence against white supremacy by black rappers and linguistic violence against women by male rappers.¹⁰ In order to rethink signifying’s application to gangsta rap, I argue that it is important to center notions of signifying in gangsta rap within a set of linguistic practices where artists, songs, and albums are understood dialogically and made to signify upon each other as much as upon white (and heteropatriarchal) social values and the political efforts to enforce them. In this way, it becomes possible to see how the negative misogynistic qualities expressed by many male rappers in gangsta rap music become rhetorical grounds that female gangsta rappers used to define their own oppositional personas. By thinking of signifying as a dialogic practice, where the

⁹ Henry Louis Gates, “2 Live Crew, Decoded,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1990.

¹⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew” in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997): 246-263.

playful conversations between texts are the locus of analysis instead of the texts themselves, the sexist descriptions of women by male rappers become the basis for rebuke and are reworked in the conversations taking place within the genre between women and men, who also collaborate in critiquing the threatening political conditions that both male and female urban black youth face.

In order to make these shifts, I will analyze the history and ideologies underlying the discursive construction of gangsta rap's censorship frame in Chapter II to show how gangsta rap's pejorative definition came to become attached to the project of engineering a neoliberal carceral state in the early 1990s that was supported by liberal and conservative – and white and black – politicians and politically-powerful private citizens at the time. In doing so, I will show how the criticism of gangsta rap was not only an attempt at characterizing black male youth as a criminal class, but was part of a broader political effort at establishing the suburban heteropatriarchal family unit as the archetype of neoliberal discipline. Gangsta rap was thus made to stand not only as a cultural explanation for the criminal behavior of black youth, but also as a means of undermining white and black suburban parental authority over suburban youth, in general. Thus suppressing gangsta rap can be seen as part of a larger effort that included the various efforts that constituted the War on Drugs, and the anti-urban and pro-suburban family measures expressed in the Clinton Administration's 1994 crime bill, which passed with broad bipartisan support, including with the support of a majority of the Congressional Black Caucus. This framing allows me to begin to interrogate how gangsta rap is simultaneously, and perhaps contradictorily,

fashioned as both misogynist and anti-heteropatriarchal and to question whether its critics were more concerned with the violence it was said to enact upon women or the rejection of suburban respectability.

While Chapter II will mostly focus on the interpretation of male rappers, I will also include a discussion Lichelle Laws, a rapper from a middle class family in Detroit who moved to Los Angeles with her friend Irene “Dee” Moore to perform under the stage name Bo\$\$, and became the most successful woman rapper to be represented by a Los Angeles gangsta rap label in the genre’s formative years. A talented rapper, her first and only album *Born Gangstaz* (1993) reached the number three spot on Billboard’s R&B/Hip Hop chart, and her two supporting singles “Deeper” and “Recipe of a Hoe” both peaked at number one on the Billboard rap charts. However, Laws became the subject of a career-ending controversy after a front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* purported to ‘expose’ her middle class upbringing, and she was subsequently heavily criticized by those concerned with gangsta rap’s inauthenticity and its ability to warp the mindset of its listeners. Yet, these critics perform a grave and willful misreading of her album, as Bo\$\$ not only fully discloses her background on multiple tracks, including the opening skit, but in fact the distance and antagonisms between black middle class suburban and poor urban life is one of the central themes she explores in her album. In this sense, her critics did less to expose Laws’s inauthenticity than expose their own stakes in shielding the suburban middle class values from the kind of critique she performs in her music.

In Chapter II, I will give an overview of some of the women who were a part of the gangsta rap scene at this time, including NiNi X, Menajahwa, and Bo\$\$, to show how they used the distinct representational techniques the genre afforded them in their music. I will suggest that it is important to distinguish between sexual vulgarity and sexist objectification in gangsta rap in order to understand how women were able to use gangsta rap's distinct form of playful vulgarity to push back against their objectification. In order to account for women's stakes in utilizing the obscene representational politics of gangsta rap, I suggest that common defenses of rap's misogyny neither accounts for how representations of sexual assault in rap reflect black women's real vulnerability to violence nor existing rebukes of gangsta rap sexism by female rappers who were participants in this early gangsta rap scene. I conclude this chapter by turning my attention to H.W.A.'s album *Livin' in a Hoe House* (1990) to demonstrate how the album signifies on rap's censors as well as N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* (1989). Like N.W.A. in *Straight Outta Compton*, H.W.A. adopts a denigrating sex-specific signifier in order to critique the suppressive forces they must navigate to survive, which includes the demeaning and disempowering descriptions of women deployed by N.W.A.

In the Conclusion, I will suggest that this intersectional and dialogic representational politics of gangsta rap imbued the genre with community-building potential based on the reconciliation of social antagonisms. This gives gangsta rappers the ability to express loving respect towards one another and imagine utopian worlds where differences can become sources of pleasure and

power, rather than the reason for the violence they currently face. Focusing on a series of collaborations between Ice Cube and Yo-Yo that took place between 1990 and 1993, I will look at how their musical relationship matured from one of playful antagonism in “It’s a Man’s World” (1991) into one symbolic of revolutionary power in “The Bonnie and Clyde Theme” (1993) as Yo-Yo increasingly aligned herself with gangsta rap. By focusing on the political reconciliation within gangsta rap, it becomes possible to see how gangsta rap can be an oppositional site where blackness is a signifier for coalition building that resists the ruptures along lines of sexual difference imposed upon African Americans by a racist society. I conclude by noting the continuation of these rhetorical and representational techniques in the present by examining Kendrick Lamar’s collaboration with Beyoncé in their performance of Beyoncé’s “Freedom” at the 2016 BET Awards.

CHAPTER II

THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF GANGSTA RAP DISCOURSE

“I believe that we are again engaged in a great civil war, a cultural war that’s about to hijack your birthright to think and say what lives in your heart. I’m sure you no longer trust the pulsing lifeblood of liberty inside you, the stuff that made this country rise from wilderness into the miracle that it is.”

- Charlton Heston, “Winning the Culture War,” Harvard Law School, February 16, 1999.

“As I see it, there are three things that prevent gangsta rap from being a freedom of speech issue. Number one, it is obscene; number two, it is obscene; and number three, it is obscene.”

- C. Delores Tucker, testimony to the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce in reference to Snoop Doggy Dogg’s *Doggy Style*, February 11, 1994.

The project of defining and interpreting gangsta rap is high stakes politics. In Charlton Heston’s speech to Harvard Law school on February 16, 1999, he suggests to his audience that America was currently in the midst of a “culture war” in which the essence of democracy was at stake. Invoking the “spirit of disobedience” embodied by history’s most famous peace-makers and civil rights icons such as Martin Luther King Jr., Henry David Thoreau, and even Jesus, Heston asks the audience to “disavow cultural correctness with massive disobedience of rogue authority, social directives, and onerous laws that weaken personal freedom.” Disobedience, he explains, is a core American value, without which there would have been no Revolutionary War nor Civil Rights Movement. He explains that disobedience in the present moment needed to take place on the level of culture and language, and implores the audience to take an active role in the war against free speech, and refuse to accept the confounding logic of political

correctness itself. “If you talk about race, it does not make you a racist,” he explains, and “if you see distinctions between the genders, it does not make you a sexist.” To fight this lack of rationality among the politically-correct left in this framework means to loudly assert one’s political beliefs to effectively silence the voices attempting to impose silence.

After making his opposition to the suppression of free speech on grounds of political correctness known, Heston tells the audience about his own involvement in the suppression of Los Angeles gangsta rapper Ice-T’s album *Cop Killer* in 1992 because of its violent title track. He describes his outrage at learning how the album full of anti-police lyrics was being marketed by Time Warner, who refused to respond to pull the record because the CD was highly-profitable and because “the rapper was black.” Notably, it seems like Heston had not listened to the song, as he consistently refers to the track as a rap song, whereas Ice-T does not rap on the track as it was actually from Ice-T’s metal band Body Count. Nevertheless, he describes being so offended by the lyrics that he attended a Time Warner stockholder’s meeting and demanded the floor, after which he read “to a hushed room of a thousand average American stockholders” the lyrics of “Cop Killer,” supposedly leaving the room in “stunned silence.” As a consequence, he explains, incorrectly, that Time/Warner terminated Ice-T’s contract (Ice-T actually voluntarily recalled his album and continued to be represented by the company), and concludes “disobedience means you have to be willing to act, not just talk.” Tellingly, Heston follows this up with another implicitly racialized

scenario. “When a mugger sues his elderly victim for defending herself,” he implores his audience, “jam the switchboard of the district attorney’s office.”¹¹

As Heston’s anecdote demonstrates, “disobedience” in the name of protecting “free speech” for him ironically means preserving hegemonic cultural values and suppressing violent counter-discourse. Indeed, the suppression of Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” in the months after the Los Angeles Riots was actually a coordinated effort involving several high-profile and powerful political figures. While Heston’s performance did play a part in the censorship effort by capturing the attention of the media and putting public pressure on Time/Warner, he was by no means acting as the lone maverick he described himself to be. On the political and legal front, Oliver North, who had only the previous year been controversially exonerated of charges for his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal after several years of trials and was now acting as president of the Freedom Alliance, hired lawyer Jack Thompson to threaten a lawsuit against Time Warner on grounds of sedition. In addition to the Freedom Alliance, other pro-police groups, including the New York Patrolman’s Benevolent Association, the Boston Police Patrolman’s Association and the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas, and the National Rifle Association, organized boycotts against Time Warner, and a number of political figures made independent statements opposing the album, with California’s Attorney General Daniel E. Lungren sending record store owners a letter calling the song “a bold incitement to kill” and asking them

¹¹ Charlton Heston, “Winning the Culture War” (speech, Harvard Law School, February 16, 1999), American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/charltonhestonculturalwar.htm>.

to voluntarily withdraw the album. Police associations threatened to prosecute Ice-T and Time Warner if an officer was killed anywhere the album was available.¹² As would come to define the opposition to gangsta rap in the early 90s, the strategy to suppress Ice-T on grounds of sedition and obscenity focused on putting market pressure on the conglomerate so as to encourage the industry to self-regulate.

This dizzying collusion of forces to pressure Time Warner into suppressing Ice-T's album were premised on interpreting his music as apolitically violent and unambiguously terroristic.

Yet, the song's defenders included the National Black Police Association, who defended Ice-T's right of free speech and released a statement explaining that he "is entitled to voice his anger and frustration with the conditions facing oppressed people."¹³ Indeed, the murderous revenge fantasy expressed in the track is clearly framed in response to the well-documented abusive and racist behavior of the LAPD. In the spoken intro to the song, Ice-T dedicates the track to "every cop that has ever taken advantage of somebody, beat 'em down or hurt 'em, because they got long hair, listen to the wrong kinda music, wrong color, whatever they thought was the reason to do it." His song's sentiment, unlike this reality of violence, clearly exists in the realm of fantasy and desire, as Ice-T states that "for every one of those fuckin' police, I'd like to take a pig out here in this parking lot

¹² Jon Parales, "Critics Notebook: The Disappearance of Ice-T's 'Cop Killer'," *New York Times*, July 20, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/30/arts/critic-s-notebook-the-disappearance-of-ice-t-s-cop-killer.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹³ Ibid.

and shoot ‘em in their motherfuckin’ face.” Even a cursory listen makes it clear that a “cop killer” mentality is a tragic condition created in response to overwhelming violence. Existing at the edge of sanity, the cop killer is described as an abject combination of calculating and impulsive in the first and second verses. In this sense, he embodies a sensibility of one who has been, to borrow from the classic reality rap song “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released almost exactly a decade prior, ‘pushed to the edge.’

<p>Verse 1:</p> <p>I got my black gloves on I got my ski mask on This shit’s been too long I got my twelve gauge sawed off I got my headlights turned off I’m ‘bout to bust some shots off I’m ‘bout to dust some cops off</p>	<p>Verse 2:</p> <p>I got my brain on hype Tonight’ll be your night I got this long-assed knife And you neck looks just right My adrenaline’s pumpin’ I got my stereo bumpin’ I’m ‘bout to kill me somethin’ A pig stopped me for nothin’!</p>
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Ice-T does not romanticize cop killing, but provides an explanation for the antagonism towards the LAPD that would come to be expressed by those who participated in the so-called Rodney King Uprising several months after the song’s release, a cataclysmic event which also likely triggered the suppressive measures against the track. The song ends with an outro which references gangsta rap group N.W.A.’s similarly-controversial song “Fuck tha Police” and follows the utterance with more concrete justifications than N.W.A.’s original song provided.

FUCK THE POLICE!
FUCK THE POLICE!, for Daryl Gates
FUCK THE POLICE!, for Rodney King
FUCK THE POLICE!, for my dead homies
FUCK THE POLICE!, for your freedom
FUCK THE POLICE!, don't be a pussy
FUCK THE POLICE!, have some mothafuckin' courage
FUCK THE POLICE!, sing along!
COP KILLER! I'm a muthafuckin'
COP KILLER!

In referencing LAPD police chief Daryl Gates alongside Rodney King and his dead homies, Ice-T connects police violence against urban African Americans to the aggressive policing policies enacted by Gates. In other words, the song foregrounds its political critique. To reject the legitimacy of Ice-T's political voice in this context meant to reject the legitimacy of those who participated in the uprising.

From its conception, gangsta rap has been subject to being suppressed by authorities through a willful misreading of its message. Just three years prior to the "Cop Killer" censorship movement, N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" was faced with a similar, if less focused, suppressive response when assistant director of the FBI office of public affairs Milt Ahlerich sent a letter to N.W.A.'s label manager on August 1, 1989 which read, in part:

A song recorded by the rap group N.W.A. on their album "Straight Outta Compton" encourages violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer and has been brought to my attention... Law enforcement officers dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens, and recordings such as the one from N.W.A. are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers. Music plays a significant role

in society, and I wanted you to be aware of the FBI's position relative to this song and its message.¹⁴

In response, liberal politicians and civil rights groups rallied in support of the group, sparking a media frenzy that defended the album by contesting Ahlerich's interpretation of it. The *LA Times*, for example, reported that Ahlerich had not listened to the song before writing his letter, and provided an alternate definition to the content of the song, calling it "N.W.A.'s brutal account of tension associated with the police gang sweeps that have become common in the Los Angeles area. The song – set in a mock courtroom where members of the group act as judge and prosecutors – is peppered with lewd and vulgar language punctuating a string of grievances about police misconduct in Compton."¹⁵ Similarly, N.W.A.'s publicist Pat Charbonnet told the *LA Times* that the letter "makes valid everything... said on the record. Their life is a lifetime of hassle and it never stopped being that way... Everything N.W.A. has to say... has been said on *Straight Outta Compton*, and there is no further comment."

As with Ice-T's "Cop Killer," the battle surrounding N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" was essentially one of definition and interpretation, where critics reject the political value of the song its defenders support. But both sides agree that at stake are lives. As both sides insist, it is important to recognize that the debate over gangsta rap is political in a concrete and material sense. In fact, the battle over interpretation of "Fuck Tha Police" reflects a similar two-sided public

¹⁴ Steve Hochman, "Compton Rappers Versus the Letter of the Law: FBI Claims Song by N.W.A. Advocates Violence on Police," *New York Times*, October 5, 1989, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-10-05/entertainment/ca-1046_1_law-enforcement.

¹⁵ Ibid.

discourse that was occurring in Los Angeles at the time between the LAPD and the young black citizens of South Central.

Just months before the FBI's letter was sent to N.W.A., 69% of California voters approved Proposition 2 on April 11, 1989, a ballot measure granting the police a \$176-million bond to fund the building of additional police facilities through increasing property taxes. While the official campaign in support of the measure framed this building as mere infrastructural upkeep, the *1989 Los Angeles Police Department Annual Report* which was published after the passing of this ballot measure, demonstrates that the LAPD was engaged in an aggressive form of police expansion at the time that was explicitly framed as a territorial battle. In the "Chief's Message," police chief Daryl Gates described the LAPD as a "Department on the move" with "an eye toward the future of law enforcement." Describing the two major crime problems in Los Angeles that "threaten the safety and peace of all citizens" and "are still largely responsible for the atmosphere of fear in our neighborhoods" to be street gangs and drug traffickers, Gates explains in no uncertain terms: "it is this Department's number one priority to regain control of our streets and neutralize the oppression of street thugs and drug dealers."¹⁶

This report identifies 1989 as "a year in which a reshaping of American policing methods took place", and much of this report is devoted to chronicling the recent development of the LAPD.¹⁷ These included a number of new policing

¹⁶ Los Angeles Police Department, *1989 Los Angeles Police Department Annual Report*, 1989 (National Criminal Justice Reference Service Number 137248): 2-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

methods, programs, and technologies that all allowed the LAPD to not only expand, but narrow its focus on keeping white Los Angeles safe from non-white Los Angeles. Three of these developments included a new computer model for patrolling called PATROL PLAN which automatically assigned police officers to patrol areas proportional to the amount of crime that occurred within those areas, implementation of community policing projects limited to certain ‘at-risk’ neighborhoods and housing developments, and a new state-of-the art helicopter patroller that was equipped with an infrared night vision sensor and an advanced communications system “that allows both pilot and observer to monitor numerous LAPD dispatch and tactical frequencies simultaneously, while providing access to the networks of every law enforcement agency and public entity in the United States.”¹⁸ In an article titled “Building for the Future,” the LAPD described its intent to use the bond money from Proposition 2 to build new training facilities and restore existing police stations. In light of the other developments described in the newsletter, the seemingly neutral building and maintenance project takes on more nefarious implications. Accompanying this article is a sketch of a police vehicle fitted with bulldozer treads, and with the words “to restore and expand” on the blade (Fig. 2). To citizens who thought of the LAPD as an agency that exists to keep them safe, this cartoon might have signified the LAPD’s commitment to positive development projects. But to the largely non-white populations living in the neighborhoods and projects being targeted by these same developments, it might be harder to accept this rhetorical veneer of neutrality.

¹⁸ Ibid., 7-11.



Fig. 2.1 – Image accompanying an article titled “Building for the Future” in the *1989 Los Angeles Police Department Annual Report*.

If considered as a response to the LAPD’s projects of ‘restoration and expansion’ taking place at the time, N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police” is an act of advocacy. Indeed, the battle for physical expansion between the LAPD and the populations they intended to target involved a media-based public image campaign. The *1989 Los Angeles Police Department Annual Report* explicitly insists on interpreting the police department as a public good, but the subtext is that the populations of neighborhoods they were targeting were ridden with drug dealers and users, gangbangers, prostitutes, and others unable to help themselves without forceful suppression. A chilling opinion piece by L.A. attorney James Hahn published in the *Los Angeles Times* early in 1988 demonstrates this side of the LAPD’s public image campaign. Titled “Rethinking Gangs’ Rights Vs. Our Rights,” Hahn paints poor neighborhoods as under siege by youth gangs to the extent that “tough new remedies are needed to combat the problem.” In response to the gang problem, Hahn explicitly advocates for removing their constitutional

rights, writing that “Freedom of speech is not absolute. Freedom of association is not absolute,” and compares the suppression of gang activity akin to other acts of accepted government suppression such as “regulations against televised cigarette commercials... restraining orders against striking workers, and orders prohibiting abusive spouses from entering or even telephoning their own homes.” Hahn minces no words in portraying the neighborhoods in question as a literal war zone:

Gang presence in some areas already has become an urban form of army occupation that renders people terrified hostages in their own homes, leaves innocent people dead, drives out legitimate commercial enterprise and forces down property value. It is time to expose the fallacy that somehow we all benefit by protecting the rights of street-gang members to associate freely and to terrorize us... The legal game is too deadly, the stakes are too high and the price is too dear to ignore this basic truth. We desperately need to rethink the balance between the constitutional rights of street gangs and the compelling state interest in protecting the innocent victims of gang terrorism. It is time for us to return to reason. It is time for us to use the legal weapons necessary to reclaim the streets of Los Angeles for the people.¹⁹

Without the power to represent themselves in the media, black youth were unable to respond to either the violent rendering of them as terroristic gang members undeserving of citizens’ rights, or the painting of the LAPD as a benevolent public good. Gangsta rap provided black youth an opportunity to do just this, by inverting the narrative and exposing the power-hungry nature of cops who, in the words of Ice Cube in “Fuck Tha Police,” think that they “have the authority to kill a minority.” The rendering of this type of critique nonsensical and

¹⁹ James K. Hahn, “Rethinking Gangs’ Rights Vs. Our Rights,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1988, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-02-05/local/me-27288_1_gang-members.

gangsta rap a form of violence through insisting on an apolitical interpretation of it in order to legally suppress it should be seen as a part of this broader effort to get the public to interpret the role of the police as benevolent and accept the intrinsic sub-citizenship of black youth.

In this regard, the suppressive force underlying the interpretation of N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" as a terroristic threat against the police was the same force behind the violent LAPD expansion taking place at this time. Loren Kajikawa suggests that the music video of N.W.A.'s song "Straight Outta Compton" paints a portrait of South Central Los Angeles as a site of "confrontation and contestation" between a powerful and predatory police force and the members of the group who are only as powerful as their words. He observes that the members of N.W.A. are always depicted on foot, whereas the police are in vehicles, such that "the contrast between these images... emphasizes the sense of entrapment felt by African Americans living in South Central Los Angeles."²⁰ As this music video demonstrates, the LAPD's project of 'restoring and expanding' is a violent one with high stakes.

This framing of the police expressed in "Fuck Tha Police" and "Straight Outta Compton" became a central theme in the music of other Los Angeles rappers, including in Ice-T's "Cop Killer," which was first performed in 1991 and recorded in early 1992. It is important to recognize the reality of violence these songs refer to. This interpretation of the police was perhaps vindicated to the mainstream when a video of black motorist Rodney King being beaten by

²⁰ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 97-98.

members of the LAPD circulated on the national news in March of 1991. Despite the unusual amount of attention this video received, a report published after and independent investigation of the LAPD known informally as the *Christopher Commission Report* found that the use of excessive force by members of the department was not uncommon. Rather, the Commission found evidence of a culture of racially-motivated sadistic policing practices that was met with indifference by higher-ups within the department. For example, the Commission found that almost 6,000 officers were involved in use of force reports between 1987-1991, and of those officers, 63 were the subjects of 20 or more reports. The Commission also found that the performance evaluations of the officers who were the most frequent offenders were generally positive such that “the performance evaluations generally did not give an accurate picture of the officers’ disciplinary history, failing to record ‘sustained’ complaints or to discuss their significance, and failing to assess the officer’s judgement and contacts with the public in light of disturbing patterns of complaints.”²¹

Beyond indifference, a review of Mobile Data Terminal (MDT) messages between patrolling officers uncovered a number of deeply disturbing racist, sexist, and generally abusive remarks making light of beatings and racial profiling. Nearly ten pages of the report are devoted to listing offensive MDT messages, which include an overwhelming number of horrifying remarks and exchanges (all sic) such as:

²¹ Christopher Commission, *Report of the Independent Commission of the Los Angeles Police Department*, 1991, X.

“No problemmm . . . we R hungry . . . we got a little physical w/ a [name omitted] on Colombus . . . it was fun . . . we had to teach him a little respect . . . for the police . . . hahahahaha . . . we had fun . . . no stick time though.”

“Did U arrest the 85yr old lady of just beat her up.” “We just slapped her around a bit . . . she/s getting m/t right now.”

“The last load when to a family of illegals living in the brush along side the pas frwy . . . I thought the woman was going to cry . . . so I hit her with my baton.”

“Did you really break his arm” “Along with other misc parts” “We have his oriental buddy for 11364” “Great . . . make sure u burn him if he’s on felony probation . . . by the way does he need any breaking . . .”

“Everybody you kill in the line of duty becomes a slave in the afterlife”
“Then U will have a lot of slaves . . .”

“. . . what’s happening . . . we’re huntin wabbits” “Actually, muslim wabbits”

“”No but I left a 14 year old girl that I me yesterday handcuffed naked o my chin-up bar wearing nothing but a blind-fold and salad oil . . . I’d like to ck on her.”

These MDT messages suggest that a predatory relationship between the police and the populations of South Central Los Angeles depicted in “Fuck Tha Police” and “Cop Killer” was indeed a reflection of reality. Further, the finding of the report point to the extremely violent implications of the LAPD’s framing of their technological and infrastructural expansion that were underway by the late 1980s.

In this regard, it is not enough to identify gangsta rap as a musical discourse that is either a form of violence or a response to violence, because its mass interpretation is rooted in a broader anti-crime discourse that appeared neutral or benevolent so as to garner public support for police expansion. Framed

by both the police and by gangsta rappers as a literal turf war, the mass (mis)interpretation and depoliticizing of gangsta rap songs is a political and suppressive act. As the concept of ‘gangsta rap’ as a violent and apolitical genre in need of disciplining from the state emerged in the early 90s, the debates surrounding these songs set the terms that would come to represent the core qualities of the genre. In the following year, the crusade against gangsta rap came to be adopted by a coalition of public and political figures with seemingly incompatible interests. White neoconservative policymakers, private and non-profit family and youth advocacy organizations, left-wing politicians susceptible to the moral panic surrounding the genre, black public intellectuals and post-civil rights leaders, and democratic members of the Congressional Black Caucus all rallied around the banner of suppressing gangsta rap. I will suggest that what links all these agents is their concern over the behavior of black urban youth and their interest in imposing order within these sites through both suppressing gangsta rap and through the support of tough-on-crime legislation.

Defining and Disciplining Gangsta Rap

Black feminist philosopher Audre Lorde has suggested that liberatory struggles would be won or lost through a struggle for definitional authority. In her 1984 essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” she presciently warns that those who exist as “surplus people” in relation to a profit-driven economy would come to be managed through processes that amount to the “institutionalized rejection of difference.” Speaking as a black lesbian who felt

affinity as well as alienation in primarily-white feminist political circles, Lorde outlines a politics of exclusion in which the experiences of those who embody multiple forms of difference are rendered excessive and outside the scope of activists who advocate for rights based on a single marker of difference such as race or sex. For Lorde, a feminism that refuses to distinguish between the experiences and oppressions of white and black women was fundamentally flawed, and allowed white feminists the ability to exercise white supremacist power over women of color.

She suggests that the stakes in being reduced to a single identity are a material matter of life or death. Speaking to those who embody multiple forms of social difference, she emphasizes that the emerging post-industrial ‘surplus economy’ was itself rooted in such a logic of exclusion that generated profit through the institutionalized rejection of difference. She argues that “we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and it that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate.”²² As Lorde observes, a profit-driven economy is invested in the management of difference among surplus populations, such that members of minority groups are able to act as agents of social control by modeling themselves off of dominant ways of being and rejecting those among themselves who refuse, or are unable, to do so.

²² Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 115.

As the critique against certain gangsta rap songs expanded into a definition of ‘gangsta rap’ as an entire genre that was seen as lacking discipline and in need of governmental intervention, it generated a moral panic that defined a certain segment of urban black youth as similarly in need of forceful intervention through welfare reform and a crackdown on crime. In this regard, the interpretation of a body of rap music that would come to be called ‘gangsta rap’ was also the interpretation of a population that was at once clearly defined by their simultaneous blackness, poor socioeconomic standing, youthfulness, and masculinity, but existed in the public imagination as an identity that exceeded these terms.

In the 1980s, South Central Los Angeles was particularly affected by the outsourcing of industrial production to global markets. This is a process that literally rendered the now-jobless populations of post-industrial sites literally surplus to the mainstream economy. In his essay, “The Neoliberal Theory of Society”, Simon Clarke explains that under capitalism, profit can only be maintained by intensifying labor requirements through extending the work day, reducing wages, and increasing efficiency, and ultimately “laying off those who are thus made surplus to requirements.” As he notes, there are profound social consequences to this process such that “a growing proportion of the population... are unable to meet the demands of capital and are condemned to destitution.”²³ By the 1990s, the distinction between African Americans who were seen as valued

²³ Simon Clarke, “The Neoliberal Theory of Society,” *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2005), 55.

citizens deserving of protection by liberals and centrists and those who were deemed criminal and deserving of imprisonment by those spanning the political spectrum is partly accountable by their relative position within the global capitalist economy and neoliberal social order. In this sense, the 'gangsta' as it came to exist in the public imagination should be understood to bridge the material and psychic dimensions of 'surplus' identity. For this reason, the discourse that yielded the notion of 'gangsta rap' was one that was not just 'about' how intersections of age, race, class, and sex were used to distinguish protectable from unprotectable minorities in the post-Civil Rights era, but also the government's role in managing surplus value generated by industries pursuing profit in a deregulated global marketplace.

Without accounting for the use of multiple forms of difference within this neoliberal regulatory discourse, the absence of women within the gangsta rap discourse seems at first to point to a contradictory identity politics. As black and male, the archetypal gangsta rapper seems to be marked by his racial difference and sexual sameness. Why would black women rappers be left out of the discursive construction of gangsta rap despite their presence alongside male rappers on essentially all major gangsta rap labels and many of the most popular and contentious gangsta rap albums?

The absence of black women in the discourse of gangsta rap mirrors other gendered absences in racial discourse at the time. For example, Angela Davis notes that women have also been left out of discussions about prison expansion, despite the fact that women's rates of imprisonment have been growing at a faster

pace than men's since the 1980s. She accounts for this by observing masculine criminality is more socially-legible than female criminality, suggesting that "deviant men have been constructed as criminal, while deviant women have been constructed as insane."²⁴ Although black men and women as members of a targeted racial group were both targeted by prison expansion, the public discourse on crime and punishment normalized male criminality and the experiences of male prisoners, while women's criminality was framed as abnormal and politically peripheral. Similarly, black men were rendered peripheral and literally 'absent' within a similar regulatory discourse on black welfare and reproduction that focused on black women's supposed exploitation of the welfare crisis. Gwendolyn Mink suggests that two assumptions underlying the discourse on welfare reform in the 1990s were "that some women should *not be mothers*" and "that deserving mothers *must* have explicit and publically recognizable connections to the fathers of their children," which were used to justify "family cap" incentives and the requirement of women to agree to Norplant implantation, an invasive long-term contraceptive treatment, in exchange for welfare.

As the concurrent racial projects of prison expansion and welfare reform suggest, the neoliberal regulation of African American 'surplus' populations involved a sexual politics that imagined the experiences and behaviors of black men and women as being fundamentally different but part of the same community in need of regulation. Black male criminals were hyperviolent and publically disruptive, whereas black women were hyperreproductive and threatened to

²⁴ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 66.

siphon resources away from the market economy. Under this double discourse, the inherent differentness of black men and women was seen as a symptom of a similar black urban pathology that was thought to pose a threat to the whole of society, and also the sanctity of black identity overall. Under this logic, state intervention was able to be argued as not racist, but benevolent. Rather than target African Americans, anti-crime policies and welfare reform was seen as a means of helping a specific segment of the black population fix the problem of the poor urban and black family, which was seen as responsible for crime and welfare exploitation. Thus, black youth behavior was argued to be symptomatic of black pathology.

In this framework, fashioning gangsta rap as an expression of black male pathology was part of a larger sexual politics where surplus population control was justified through a focus on internal gender antagonisms. While women rappers were not entirely excluded from this discourse, they were either argued to be mimickers or reformers, and never participants within the genre. In this regard, the process of 'disciplining' of gangsta rap into a coherent genre partly defined by its problematic sexual politics was itself rooted in its own sexual politics. As Audre Lorde warned that social control would be rooted in such a politics of difference, it is important to interrogate how the 'sexual politics of anti-gangsta rap discourse' itself performed an act of gender violence in effectively silencing the voices of women rappers in order to place it within a disciplinary discourse. Indeed, the interpretation of gangsta rap was high-stakes politics.

In this regard, the censorship of gangsta rap was a suppressive and regulatory discourse that supported the regulation of an entire surplus population through supposedly taking a position against ‘violence.’ The debates surrounding the interpretation of “Fuck Tha Police” and “Cop Killer” were early examples of what legal scholar Leola Johnson calls the “five-year campaign to censor gangsta rap” that took place within the media and through various legal and legislative institutions between 1989-1994. As album sales by Los Angeles rap artists started to outpace more mainstream and palatable pop acts, their music became the subject of a moral panic. Much of the mass media discourse surrounding the genre contributed to what Christopher Schneider identifies as rap’s “censorship frame.”²⁵ According to Schneider, the public’s perception of gangsta rap in the early 1990s was reinforced by the media construction of a framework that interpreted the genre as apolitical, inappropriate, and lacking in artistic merit. He writes that after the release of *Straight Outta Compton* and 2 Live Crew’s *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (which I will look at more closely in the next chapter), “media reports begin to spotlight the negative lyrical content contained within rap music narratives” such that it “facilitates the conditions necessary for the transfer of important symbolic messages of criminality.”²⁶ Indeed, it’s important to recognize the extent that gangsta rap as a genre has become discursively criminalized and the works that have come to represent the genre are subject to

²⁵ Leola Johnson, “Silencing Gangsta Rap: Class and Race Agendas in the Campaign Against Hardcore Rap Lyrics,” *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review* 3, no. 25 (1993-1994): 25-43.

²⁶ Christopher J. Schneider, “Culture, Rap Music, ‘Bitch,’ and the Development of the Censorship Frame,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 20, no. 10 (2010): 15.

being interpreted as embodying criminal qualities. In this sense, ‘gangsta rap’ has taken on a pejorative definition that pre-interprets artists, albums, and songs described by the term.

Whereas the debates surrounding the songs described in the previous section tended to focus on how they cast law enforcement in a negative light, the mainstream definition of ‘gangsta rap’ that began to emerge in 1993 framed the genre’s violence more broadly, and more existentially. Rather than simply encouraging listeners to reject state authority and enact violence against the police, gangsta rap was said to represent a culture of criminality that would warp the mindsets of its young listeners. Because gangsta rap was said to encourage children to join gangs, sell and consume drugs, abuse women, and engage in amoral pleasure-seeking behavior, discourse on the genre became attached to broader national conversations about urban youth crime that resulted in a bipartisan and multi-ethnic campaign to ‘stop the violence’ through the funding of tough-on-crime policies and other suppressive measures on a national level.

It is not mere coincidence that the congressional hearings led by members of the Congressional Black Caucus meant to scrutinize gangsta rap’s role in causing violence occurred at the same time as the congressional hearings that resulted in the passing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, colloquially known as the “Clinton Crime Bill” in the early months of 1994. Indeed, the members of the CBC who were most vocal about their desire to regulate and suppress the genre voted in support of and contributed items to the crime bill, while its most vocal defenders such as Rep. Maxine Waters would go

on to vote against the bipartisan bill that has been heavily criticized for its role in creating what Angela Davis has called the Prison Industrial Complex and Michelle Alexander refers to as the “New Jim Crow.”²⁷ I suggest that far from being abstractly connected, the interpretation of both gangsta rap and black post-industrial sites at this time as undisciplined spaces in need of official intervention was rooted in the same logic that brought otherwise politically opposed figures together in collaboration.

In this logic, tough-on-crime laws and policies that accompanied the War on Drugs and War on Poverty were able to explicitly target African American populations while maintaining that these policies were ultimately anti-racist in nature. Because post-industrial urban centers such as South Central Los Angeles were associated with poor African American populations, and these sites were also said to be under siege by mostly-black youth gangs responsible for crimes that held back the law-abiding citizens of these locales, policies directed at putting black youth in prison were said to be in service of the ‘black community’ writ large. As with the LAPD’s expansion in the late 1980s, the national discourse supported by this logic insists upon an interpretation of a form of pathological black hypermasculinity said to be heard within gangsta rap and also said to be embodied by the populations being criminalized.

²⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010); the bill passed in its final form with support of 25 of the 39 members of the CBC. Among those who voted to pass the bill include Representative Cardiss Collins and Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, who led the anti-gangsta rap congressional hearings in the House and Senate, respectively.

Many scholars who have written about gangsta rap preface their analysis with a description of the material conditions of Los Angeles. Kelley, for example, argues that gangsta rap songs provide insight into the post-industrial conditions the rappers find themselves within. He writes that the “generation that came of age in the 1980s was the product of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back at least to the late 1960s,” and details the impact that suburbanization and the establishment of a high-tech economy in sparsely-populated and wealthy locations like Silicon Valley and Orange County had on inner-city populations. Citing high unemployment, cuts in government spending on public services and affordable housing, and the ravages of crack cocaine, Kelley writes that “as popular media coverage of the inner city associated drugs and violence with black youth, young African Americans by virtue of being residents in South Central L.A. and Compton were subject to police harassment and, in some cases, feared by older residents.”²⁸ Similarly, Eithne Quinn refers to Marxist geographer Edward Soja’s concept of “post-Fordism” to describe the radical changes in the primary mode of capital production in the 1980s that led to gangsta rap’s emergence. She especially notes how at the same time that the Reagan and Bush presidencies were passing policies that led to the construction of a carceral system targeting poor black urban populations, a profusion of low-skill part-time service industry jobs replaced skilled manufacturing jobs, which were increasingly being outsourced overseas and south of the border. In her analysis, gangsta rap became an alternative for disenfranchised black youth who were

²⁸ Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” 192-193.

dissatisfied with such low-wage menial labor and seeking alternative ways to get paid that would not land them in prison. As she puts it:

Between the diminishing life chances and the effects of draconian corrections policies, overseen if not spearheaded by the government, poor urban youth increasingly lost faith in the legitimacy of mainstream society. This profound alienation, coupled with thwarted aspiration, was everywhere reflected in their responses to this grim situation.²⁹

In this sense, both Kelley and Quinn follow Tricia Rose's lead in rooting their analyses of gangsta rap in the urban spaces where it is produced.³⁰ However, I believe that the study of gangsta rap presents a unique challenge to scholars because it is a genre that formed on the other side of the country and around a decade after hip hop culture first emerged in the South Bronx in the mid-1970s. Whereas hip hop culture formed 'under the radar' and did not attract much mainstream attention at first, gangsta rap is a genre that was formed under scrutiny and mass-interpreted in a way to justify the very policies that Kelley and Quinn suggest gangsta rap is a response to. While the Reagan and Bush administrations were responsible for deregulating industry and reducing government spending on infrastructural maintenance and welfare, it was mostly at the state and local level where experimental 'tough-on-crime' policies that would be incorporated into the national crime bill in 1994 such as mandatory minimum sentencing, truth in sentencing, and "Three Strikes and You're Out" laws and

²⁹ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 48.

³⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994).

suppressive gang-busting tactics were passed. While it is true that certainly the case that many gangsta rap tracks respond to police oppression and often describe the hustle of unofficial and often-illegal alternatives to wage labor, it is important to recognize that gangsta rappers also tend to show an awareness of how little control they have over the interpretation of their music as well as the stakes in this battle for interpretation and definitional authority.

For example, Ice Cube's third album, *The Predator* (1993), contains several tracks that directly ties the anti-blackness underlying the public's response to gangsta rap to its support of black genocide. In the first track on the album following a skit sampled from the film *American Me* titled "When Will They Shoot," Ice Cube opens with a verse where he compares himself to black male victims such as Rodney King and Malcolm X, who were also victims of the consequences of willful misinterpretations:

Goddamn, another fuckin payback with a twist
Them motherfuckers shot but the punks missed
Ice Cube is out-gunned, what is the outcome?
Will they do me like Malcolm?

...

Media try to do me
But I was a Boy-N-the-Hood before the movie,
Yeah
Call me a nigga, bigot, and a spook
But you the one that voted for Duke,
motherfucker

...

I thought they was buggin'
Cause to us Uncle Sam is Hitler without an oven
Burnin' our black skin
Buy my neighborhood – then push the crack in
Doin' us wrong from the first day
And don't understand why a nigga got an AK

...

Devil, you got the shit right I'm black
Blacker than a trillion midnights
"Don't Believe the Hype" was said in '88
By the great Chuck D, now they're tryin' to fuck me
...
Here the Mack come, here the black come,
Watch Jack run!
...
Made a little dough, still got a sister on my elbow
Did Ice Cube sell out? You say, "Hell no!"
A black woman is my manager, a black woman
Is my manager, not in the kitchen
So could you please stop bitchin'?

In preemptively describing how a racist public will interpret his album, Ice Cube distinguishes himself from the previous examples of gangsta rap songs that were produced before the concept of 'gangsta rap' had entered the public discourse.

While Ice Cube does not directly connect the interpretation of gangsta rap to the support of anti-crime legislation, he does suggest that the interpretation of his music as violent and sexist is politically-motivated and based on an indifference to the actual content of his music.

It was indeed in the months following the Los Angeles Riots that gangsta rap as a genre came to be the subject of a suppressive discourse. While the controversies and attempted censorship of both N.W.A.'s "Fuck The Police" and Ice-T's "Cop Killer" were centered on interpreting individual songs that were said to contain dangerous messages, a media frenzy surrounding "gangsta rap" emerged following the uprising in 1993. Gangsta rap in this moment came to be only loosely associated with the Los Angeles rap scene, and broadly defined as a rap genre that enacts violence by glorifying criminal lifestyles and rendering women as sex objects. While earlier censorship campaigns against individual

songs were mostly led by mostly white and racially unspecified groups, it was around this time that the movement against gangsta rap came to be comprised of a broad and seemingly contradictory coalition of neoconservative and neoliberal policy-makers, family-based advocacy groups, law enforcement agencies, and African American post-civil rights leaders. Each of these groups seemed to have different stakes in opposing gangsta rap, yet they often shared a similar critique of gangsta rap's obscene lyrics and the ideological damage the music did to its young listeners.

An article by Brent Staples, an African American editorial writer for the *New York Times*, published on August 1993 articulates what would become the conventional interpretation of gangsta rap as a form of violence itself in need of censorship or suppression. The title of the piece, "The Politics of Gangster: A Music Celebrating Murder and Misogyny," clearly defines the violent qualities that were being used to define, and thus criticize, gangsta rap. Staples self-consciously writes for an audience unacquainted with the music of L.A. rappers, but somewhat aware of the anti-rap polemic. Addressing "those who haven't caught up," Staples defines the genre in relation to these two structuring violent traits, calling it a "wildly successful music in which all women are 'bitches' and 'whores' and young men kill each other for sport."³¹

Also evident is the connection between the critique against gangsta rap and middle-class ideation. In his opening sentence, Staples claims that "the most dangerous myth facing African-Americans today is that middle-class life is

³¹ Brent Staples, "The Politics of Gangsta Rap: A Music Celebrating Murder and Misogyny," *New York Times*, August 27, 1993, A28.

counterfeit and that only poverty and suffering, and the rage that attends them, are real.” Here, Staples hones in on the inauthenticity of the gangsta personas of rappers, and diagnoses the genre as having a “poverty fetish” that does ideological damage to black youth.³² Significantly, while Staples’s essay seems to be meant to introduce gangsta rap to his readership, he follows the pattern of gangsta rap critics performing blatant misreadings of the music meant to be politicized. Although he cites scholar Mike Davis in locating gangsta rap’s in the Los Angeles scene, for example, the only lyrics he reproduces are by the New York-based hardcore hip hop band Onyx. As Staples shows, the definition of ‘gangsta rap’ as a genre signifier for rap-as-violence was developed in response to *discourse about* gangsta rap songs, rather than the study of gangsta rap *as discourse*. Actual knowledge of gangsta rap music becomes irrelevant, perhaps even undermining the ideological authority of the author.

Staples politicizes the genre by rooting its definition in the ideological violence it enacts. Before 1993, ‘gangsta rap’ was a descriptive term used in reviews and by rap followers to qualitatively distinguish a relatively small and close-knit Los Angeles school of rappers from their East Coast counterparts. In Pulitzer Prize-winning *Los Angeles Times* critic Chuck Philips’s multiple articles reporting on Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” controversy in June and July of 1992, he avoids the term entirely in two special reports detailing the controversy. Philips only uses the term in the preface of an interview with Ice-T, where he is described as a

³² Ibid.

“gangsta” rapper (scare quotes his) “whose rock song as infuriated government officials and police officers’ groups.”³³

Similarly, in a 1990 episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* devoted to discussing Ice-T’s polemically-titled album *The Iceberg (Freedom of Speech... Just Watch What You Say)*, his lyrics are heavily criticized as violent and inappropriate by panelists Tipper Gore of the Parental Music Resource Center, Juan Williams of the *Washington Post*, and Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. While Ice-T is never called a ‘gangsta rapper,’ the terms Staples would use to criticize gangsta rap as a genre three years later correlate to the terms used to criticize Ice-T in this show. For example, Williams, who would incidentally be forced to resign from his position in the *Washington Post* the following year due to multiple accusations of sexual harassment by female employees,³⁴ called Ice-T’s music a “malevolent, evil influence” on children after citing isolated examples of misogynistic lyrics. Tipper Gore also anticipates Staples by stating her desire for “both artists and record companies” to put a higher value on children, explaining:

We all share a responsibility for the values we transmit to our kids. We have freedom of speech in this country, and you have a right to speak out against them, and we also have a right to alert parents that this is being marketed aggressively to very young kids at a time when they are forming their opinions.

³³ Chuck Philips, “‘Arnold Schwarzenegger Blew Away Dozens of Cops as the Terminator. But I Don’t Hear Anyone Complaining’: A Q&A with Ice-T about Rock, Race, and the ‘Cop Killer’ Furor,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1992, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-07-19/entertainment/ca-4406_1_cop-killer.

³⁴ Howard Kurtz, “Post Reporter Williams Apologizes for ‘Inappropriate’ Verbal Conduct,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 1991, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/21/AR2010102102009.html>.

While the term ‘gangsta rap’ is not used, rap critic Nelson George who was there speaking in defense of Ice-T and rap music in general took issue with the characterization of rap by Ice-T’s critics, insisting “rap is not a monolith. It has to be taken artist by artist.” According to George, rap’s internal distinctions should be defined by the rhetorical and representational strategies of the artists. Unlike Public Enemy who he describes as “essentially Black Nationalists” and Stetsasonic “who are humanist and preach black education,” George explains that “when you take an artist like Ice-T,” it is important to understand that “what they really do is describe the reality of the world they are living in.”

In describing Ice-T in these terms George attempts to defend the rapper’s music and the music of ‘artists like him’ by assigning positive value to the representational strategies deployed by rappers in this school while also overcoming the notion that Ice-T’s music stands for all rap. These descriptive qualities align closely with how the term ‘gangsta rap’ was used by hip hop fans and music critics before it became a pejorative term. When it was first used by *LA Weekly* journalist Jonathan Gold to describe South Central-based N.W.A.’s “breathtakingly violent, vulgar, gangster rap jam” “Gangsta Gangsta” on May 5, 1989, the term referred to a hardcore embodied musical style that came to replace the sleeker, DJ- and club-centric sound of “overhyped electro-hoppers” like the World Class Wrecking Cru who had previously defined the L.A. sound. In some ways this neologism was a gentle rejection of the notion that N.W.A. was best described as “reality rap,” which Gold describes as a term that “guilty white

liberals” used when explaining why they enjoy the album, and carried more complex political implications that implied an element of artful falsity to be central to the representational strategies of N.W.A.. Noting that the group members “insist they know gangbangers but are not themselves gangbangers,” and recounting how a prominent Crip hung up on a journalist friend when she asked him about the group, ‘gangsta rap’ posed a kind of fascinating problematic that Gold suggests was based as much on depicting reality as it was on cultivating falsehoods.³⁵ While the term did not come into common usage until the early 1990s, Gold’s framing of N.W.A., and by extension, gangsta rap in general, as a term defined by its contradictions and the interplay between the violence of reality and over-the-top fantasy violence, laid a foundation for interpreting the genre up to the present.

Following Staples’ piece, the connection between gangsta rap and criminality would solidify and extend to define the problematic mindset of the gangsta rapper himself. An article published in *Billboard* magazine by the magazine’s first rap editor Havelock Nelson on November 13th, 1993 condemned the violent lifestyles of gangsta rappers, including Snoop Doggy Dogg and Tupac Shakur, as well as Flava Flav of Public Enemy. The subtitle of this article, “‘Gangsta’ Gunplay Sparks Industry Debate” reaffirms the pejorative definition of the term, since it centers on – but extends beyond – rappers of the L.A. school, and uses the term to primarily refer to rap’s association with criminality. Nelson argues that “rappers reflect society,” and the article features multiple statements

³⁵ Mike Gold, “N.W.A.: A Hard Act to Follow,” *LA Weekly*, May 5, 1989, <http://www.laweekly.com/music/nwa-a-hard-act-to-follow-2151044>.

by prominent figures in the industry and in black rights groups who advocated for tighter management by profit-driven record labels. Editor of rap newspaper *Rap Sheet* Darryl James was quoted as saying that “some performers confuse real life with their pop lives, and when that occurs, things get out of control... Art is supposed to imitate life, but some of these rappers and their images are so large that at some point, life begins to imitate art. And that’s when it becomes a problem. And we’re there now.” Everton Bailey, president of New York men’s group Brothers United to Save Our Youth characterizes the problem posed by gangsta rap succinctly, explaining “rap, which used to mean black, is starting to mean black and male and violent.”³⁶

This *Billboard* article represents a marked shift from discussions of gangsta rap the previous year. In a piece also by Nelson from November 1992 about the reluctance of retailers to stock the ‘explicit’ rap of Ice-T and Too \$hort, he blamed a “right-wing attack on rap” and a “moral panic and its resulting sparks” for effectively censoring rap music. The tagline for the article, “a maturing art form fights for respect,” shows Nelson supporting rap and opposing its political censorship. It may seem surprising, then, that only one year later, Nelson and others who initially defended *rap* music would join its critics in criticizing *gangsta rap*. In this moment, it became commonplace to criticize hardcore rap as a means of defending the political and artistic integrity of rap as a whole. In this sense, the development of the anti-gangsta rap moral panic mirrors the logic of the anti-crime movement in which left-wing politicians and black

³⁶Havelock Nelson, “Music & Violence: Does Crime Pay?: ‘Gangsta’ Gunplay Sparks Industry Debate,” *Billboard*, November 13, 1993, 109.

post-civil rights leaders who supported tough-on-crime policies often condemned the behavior of young black criminals as a means of supporting the black community as a whole.

It is important to interrogate the co-development of the anti-gangsta rap discourse and other suppressive discourses in the early 1990s. As the concept of ‘gangsta rap’ as a genre began to take shape, it contributed to the imagination of a poor black urban form of pathological hypermasculinity embodied by young criminals. Insofar as this form of pathological black hypermasculinity was imagined as the cultural and psychological reason for high crime rates in black urban neighborhoods, gangsta rap provided the image of the young black men and boys in post-industrial spaces who were the imagined target of tough-on-crime policies. As anti-gangsta rap and tough-on-crime discourse both demonstrate, one of the means of supporting ‘black progress’ came to be the imprisonment of young black people who were blamed for holding the rest of the ‘community’ back. This movement was rooted in not only in anti-blackness, but also the centering of a heteropatriarchal suburban lifestyle, as well as a concurrent moral panic over youth in general. All of this coalesced into a contradictory logic where persecuting black urban youth was able to be argued as essentially anti-racist.

Gangsta Rap and the Problem of Influence: The Case of Bo\$\$

Because the anti-gangsta rap discourse often correlated with the anti-criminal discourse that was reaching a similarly fevered pitch by 1993, it is not surprising that the artists who were frequently referred to by gangsta rap’s critics

were almost exclusively black and male. As political scientist Anthony M. Platt observed at the time, “today, as often in the past, the law-and-order discourse is a thinly coded representation about race, an ‘ideological conductor’ for both popular discontents and the state’s inability to manage racial antagonisms.”³⁷ Indeed, as gangsta rap came to be the subject of a moral panic in the early 1990s, the issue of urban criminality reached the top of the public’s major concerns in the fall of 1993.

Ronald Kramer and Raymond Michalowski note that there was initially hope that the Clinton administration would support a progressive approach to crime. Before the unveiling of its aggressive crime-control package in August of 1993, Attorney General Janet Reno publically supported a “national agenda for children” that involved prenatal care for women and preventative medical care for infants, access to affordable childcare, and state-sponsored service corps opportunities for teens.³⁸ However, none of this was included in the Clinton administration’s crime-control package, and Janet Reno was effectively ignored afterwards. Describing the earliest version of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act passed by the Senate in 1993, they note:

... this \$23 billion package was grim. The bill provided nine billion dollars for 100,000 more police, three billion dollars for new regional prisons, three billion dollars in grants to the states to help run their prisons, and a half billion dollars to fund new prisons for chronically violent juveniles. To qualify for these funds, the states must adopt the latest ‘get

³⁷ Anthony M. Platt, “The Politics of Law and Order,” *Social Justice* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 5.

³⁸ Ronald Kramer and Raymond Michalowski, “The Iron Fist and the Velvet Tongue: Crime Control Policies in the Clinton Administration,” *Social Justice* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 90.

tough' gimmicks, such as 'Three Strikes and You're Out' and 'truth in sentencing.' The bill also extended the death penalty to 52 new crimes, federalized a large number of offenses, and was larder with penalty enhancements for many other crimes.³⁹

As was the case with anti-gangsta rap criticisms, the discourse surrounding the moral panic that garnered support for such a massive expansion of the criminal justice system was based on an image of a young black urban male whose undisciplined behavior necessitated a strong state response. While this movement was explicitly racist in that there was no attempt at hiding the extent that the its focus was on urban criminals in black and brown neighborhoods, it was also rooted in a 'color-blind' logic where the targets of this expansion were not black children but 'gangsters' or 'thugs' who were themselves responsible for committing violence against black communities.

A *Time* magazine cover published on August 23rd, 1993 with the headline "America the Violent: Crime is Spreading and Patience is Running Out" depicts this archetypal criminal. Significantly, the figure's face is abstracted such that his blackness is established through his 'gangsta' attire, including a hoodie, handcuffs made of gold chains and gold rings on his closed fists. In this regard, the 'gangsta' depicted on this cover is the embodiment of the crime problem. As an editorial by criminologists James Q. Wilson and Susanne Washburn in this issue of *Time* put it, urban crime was being thought of as a problem stemming from the loss of central control in the wake of increased artistic and expressive freedom during the neoliberal 90s. Echoing the call to "rethink gangs rights vs. our rights" made by

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

James Hahn five years earlier, they specifically correlate an ‘artistic explosion’ with the ‘crime explosion,’ writing:

The most significant thing in the last half-century has been the dramatic expansion in personal freedom and personal mobility, individual rights, the reorienting of culture around individuals. We obviously value that. But like all human gains, it has been purchased at a price... [A] small fraction of people have used it for bad purposes. **So just as we have had an artistic and economic explosion, we have had a crime explosion.** I think the two are indissolubly entwined. When that prosperity puts cars, drugs and guns into the hands of relatively poor 18-year-olds, young people can do a great deal more damage today than they could in the 1940s or 1950s (emphasis mine).⁴⁰



Figure 2.2 – Front Cover of *Time Magazine* on August 3rd, 1993

While this anti-crime discourse clearly contained racist overtones, it is significant that the blackness of criminal gangsters and thugs was generally only

⁴⁰ James Q. Wilson and Susanne Washburn, “Crime: A Rhythm to the Madness,” *Time*, August 23, 1993.

directly referenced in terms of the irony that one of the greatest struggles of the black community was to manage the threat posed by black children. Because of this, the youthfulness of criminals was discussed openly but in color-blind terms. This resonates with Robert Giroux's description of the neoliberal "crisis over youth culture" of the 1990s. According to him:

Youth as a self and social construction has become indeterminate, alien, and sometimes hazardous in the public eye. A source of repeated moral panics and the object of social regulation, youth cannot be contained and controlled within a limited number of social spheres. Youth cultures are often viewed in the popular press as aberrant, unpredictable, and dangerous in terms of the investments they produce, social relations they affirm, and the anti-politics they sometimes legitimate. Contemporary youth, especially from the inner city, increasingly signify for the mainstream public and unwarranted rejection of an idealized past, a homogenous culture, and an evangelical Christian future.⁴¹

Bill Clinton himself framed notions of progress by focusing on youth behavior, suggesting that they be seen as both the primary victims and perpetrators of crime. During his 1994 State of the Union Address, he uses the word 'children' sixteen times. On education, Clinton spoke of imposing national educational standards, asking "are our children learning what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy?"; on developing informational technology and increasing internet access, Clinton explains "instant access to information will increase productivity, will help to educate our children"; on welfare, he discusses denying welfare to single teenage parents because "people who bring children into this world cannot and must not walk away from them". Clinton concludes his speech

⁴¹ Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 11.

with an impassioned plea to center the conversation about American growth and renewal on children:

My fellow Americans, we can cut the deficit, create jobs, promote democracy around the world, pass welfare reform and health care, pass the toughest crime bill in history, but still leave too many of our people behind. The American people have got to want to change from within if we're going to bring back work and family and community. We cannot renew our country when within a decade more than half the children will be born into families where there has been no marriage. We cannot renew this country when 13-year-old boys get semiautomatic weapons to shoot 9-year-olds for kicks. We can't renew our country when children are having children and the fathers walk away as if the kids don't amount to anything... We can't renew our country until we realize that governments don't raise children, parents do.

...

I say to you tonight, let's give our children a future. Let us take away their guns and give them books. Let us overcome their despair and replace it with hope. Let us, by our example, teach them to obey the law, respect our neighbors, and cherish our values. Let us weave these sturdy threads into a new American community that can once more stand strong against the forces of despair and evil because everybody has a chance to talk into a better tomorrow.⁴²

In Clinton's speech the 'state of the children' is the metric by which he measures the 'state of the union.' In this sense, while the national discourse on both crime and gangsta rap focused on the problem of youth criminality, the sexual politics of the suppressive measures supported by this discourse are fully-rooted in reproductive control and the centering of the disciplinary function of the suburban heteropatriarchal family unit to prevent criminal behavior from emerging in the first place. In the absence of a stable family to discipline children, Clinton and

⁴² William J. Clinton, "State of the Union," *C-SPAN* video, January 25, 1994, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?54050-1/1994-state-union-address>.

those who supported his crime bill argued that the State was responsible for imposing external discipline through prison expansion, community policing, welfare cuts, and other suppressive measures.

As Staples' claim that "the most dangerous myth facing African-Americans today is that middle-class life is counterfeit and that only poverty and suffering, and the rage that attends them are real" suggests, the tendency of gangsta rappers to abandon the ideal of the suburban/middle class was the primary grounds for the genre's suppression. In this regard, the problem of gangsta rap was not only about male chauvinism and criminal behavior, but also the difference between lower class urban and middle class suburban black identity. Therefore, while the anti-gangsta moral panic tended to make examples of male rappers who had been accused of crimes, the more fundamental threat that the genre posed was to its young listeners.

Indeed, this crisis between the urban and suburban black identity is how Bo\$\$, the one exception to the rule that gangsta rap's critics focused exclusively on male rappers, was framed. In my estimation, no gangsta rap artist showed more awareness of the political implications of the urban-suburban polemics underlying gangsta rap's politics than Lichelle "Bo\$\$" Laws, a female rapper whose debut album *Born Gangstaz* reached number three on *Billboard's* Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart in 1993. Laws grew up in a middle class family in Detroit and moved to Compton with her friend Irene "Dee" Moore to pursue a career as a gangsta rapper after graduating high school. Although Bo\$\$ self-consciously probes at the distance between black suburban and poor urban life, she was

lambasted for her inauthenticity and made to stand for the ideological damage committed by gangsta rap.

A front-page article published in the *Wall Street Journal* on February 3, 1994 by Brett Pulley titled “How a nice girl evolved into Boss, the gangster rapper” describes Bo\$\$ as a case study in the dangers of middle class black youth becoming seduced by gangsta rap’s allure. Although Bo\$\$ made no attempt at hiding her middle class origins, even opening *Born Gangstaz* with a humorous skit titled “A Call From Mom” in which her real-life mother leaves a message on her answering machine telling her that her music “does not sound nice” coming from a “young lady who was brought up through Catholic school for twelve years,” the *Wall Street Journal* exposé portrays Bo\$\$ as an inauthentic liar who threw her life away in order to imitate the lifestyle portrayed in gangsta rap through her music. Contrasting her past life as an aspiring “positive” rapper in Detroit to her life after moving to L.A. where she began selling drugs, sleeping on benches, and drinking heavily, Pulley paints a picture of a young girl’s lost innocence while ignoring the content of her artistic output almost entirely.

In fact, as the first female hardcore rapper to achieve mainstream success, Bo\$\$’s contribution to rap is artistically significant and by all accounts it was her exceptional lyrical depth and tight flow that allowed her to land her coveted record deal with Russell Simons of Def Jam. According to Bo\$\$ herself, she and Dee had to work hard to get male producers to pay attention to them. Def Jef, the first major hip hop artist to champion her, describes overcoming his initial skepticism upon their first meeting. “She was living in some crappy \$40-a-day

hotel in Compton... And she was shy. But as soon as she started rappin' I stopped her. I just said, 'You're gonna be a big star.'"⁴³ However, Bo\$\$ did not like Def Jef's beats and ultimately turned down the opportunity to collaborate with him, instead demanding a hearing by Def Jef's producers Tracy Kendrick and Courtney Branch. Kendrick and Branch were impressed and introduced her to Russell Simmons, who agreed to turn Bo\$\$ into a pet project to test the marketability of a legitimately hardcore female gangsta rapper.

Although her critics claimed that Bo\$\$ merely reproduced the violent tropes of gangsta rap to sell records, I believe that her album should be seen as making a singular contribution to the genre. Her singles, "Deeper," "I Don't Give a Fuck," and "Progress of Elimination" explore the pain of being caught between two class existences with a psychological depth that was unmatched. She does not hide her middle class origins as Pulley implies, but rather meditates on the distance between middle class suburban and poor urban black life. After describing a numbed and drugged state of mind on the first verse of "Deeper" which begins "I don't really wanna feel/Like I'm in a daze so I smoke big kill," she explores the source of pain driving her journey towards gangsta rap in the third verse:

Aye yo, I got them buck-wild thrills, living foul kills
I'm trying to get to Watts but I'm stuck in Baldwin Hills
Trying to find myself for real though, check it
If I just rewind myself I'll see it ain't that hectic
Y'all don't hear me talking but it's time to get a stack
'Cause I'm about a second away from going back
To the corner slangin' dope

⁴³ Brian Smith, "Same as the Old Boss," *Metro Times*, June 16, 2004, <http://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/same-as-the-old-boss/Content?oid=2178805>.

Gankin' cluckers, jackin' high, cappin' marks
I may be losin' my mind but better than my heart

Here, Bo\$\$ describes a process of “finding herself” while located physically in the middle class Baldwin Hills but desiring the opportunity to experience life from the lower class Watts. She acknowledges that this makes it appear that she is losing her mind and is thus easily dismissed. But this preserves her integrity, regardless of how incoherent she appears to be.

Beyond this track, her music is full of metaphors exploring the loss that comes with upwards class mobility. In the song “Progress of Elimination,” she uses the metaphor of hustling and eliminating competition as a critique on the erasure of poor black lives that occurs via middle class ascension. The song plays with a standard gangsta rap trope that imagines producing rap as a drug hustle, but she insists that middle class mobility is also a hustle, and expresses ambivalence of ascending the ranks through eliminating competition:

Who am I to flip a wicked bitch?
Business is business
But now the revelation has revealed
How the Bo\$\$ Bitch is trying to get rich
...
I think I jumped into a maze
And now I'm being surrounded by dead niggas in a daze
Some kind of way I have become a slave
Yes sir Masta
No sir Masta
I work fasta, even if it means my brain being tampered with
Fuck it!
At least I got rid of the pamper

In the second verse, she more clearly connects the metaphor of hustling to class ascension by again referencing, rather than masking, her middle class background through punning on ‘driveways’ vs. ‘drive-bys’:

Time is running out I’m still self-employed
They talkin’ this Pitt shit but I’m tryin’ to get back to Detroit
Fuck it if I need to do these niggas I’m a do ‘em too
And step the fuck off as if I never knew them fools
See ya!
Now the shit is going my way
I’m hittin’ the highway
No mo’ drive-bys
In my driveway
This is what’s happenin’
I’m finally at my destination
...
Knockin’ em off was a cinch but I’m stuck
And ain’t no way that I’mma rest my head on
Another bench
Fuck!
I’m sick of this shit
Let me slip into this alley
And try to fly as high as I can get
With 200 blunts and 100 spliffs
Now every member of my click is in his grave
I’m truly the Bo\$\$ bitch now
Nobody’s slave
How do I plea?
Listen! I’ll neva give an explanation
Cause as far as I’m concerned
The only way to progress is through
Elimination!

By framing her desire to return to Detroit through eliminating those weaker than her as a fruitless endeavor that sees her still stuck, still addicted to drugs, and with all her friends dead, Bo\$\$ makes the case that “progress” out of slavery without doing anything to challenge the existence of slavery itself necessarily requires the disavowal and “elimination” of those left behind. This is a perceptive critique that

was not being made with such depth by any other gangsta rappers at the time, and is rooted in her experiences living both suburban middle class and urban lower class black existence.

Because Bo\$\$ was unique in centering on these themes in her music, it is telling that her critics failed to see Bo\$\$'s artistic integrity and intention, instead writing about the idea of her middle class rejection, rather than the messages found within her music. Of the artists who were regularly politicized so as to politicize gangsta rap between 1993 and 1994 – including N.W.A. and the solo acts of N.W.A. members Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre, alongside 2Pac, and Snoop Doggy Dogg – Bo\$\$ was the only to be regularly referred to as a victim of gangsta rap rather than gangsta rapper herself. Further, as a woman who was essentially seen as coerced into making irrational downwards class progress after being seduced by gangsta rap, she came to represent the warped subjectivity that risked being created through irresponsible listening practices. As critics' indifference to Bo\$\$'s music demonstrates, the criticism of gangsta rap was invested in emphasizing the relationship between gangsta rap and the criminality of gangsta rappers by focusing on its ability to derail the middle class-oriented progress of the black community as a whole. Bo\$\$'s self-aware and critical standpoint between the middle class and poor urban class was interpreted as hypocrisy by her critics who were defining gangsta rap as an imminent threat that enacted existential – and thus criminal – violence against symbolic blackness. In this way, Bo\$\$'s music and the response to her critical rejection of this neoliberal logic articulates how gangsta rap became a site where the post-civil rights liberal

imaginary found common ground with the white neoconservative pro-prison and tough-on-crime interests.

The union between these two seemingly irreconcilable visions through the same anti-gangsta rap discourse can be gleaned from two articles published in February 1994 by black feminist Donna Britt and conservative policymaker John Carlson. Both articles focus on gangsta rap's negative impact on black youth in particular, describing it as a form of white supremacist suppression enacted against black communities. However, the goals and intended audiences of the two authors couldn't be more different, with Britt expressing pain at the self-destructive attitudes of young African Americans, and Carlson framing the expansion of tough-on-crime policy targeting black communities as anti-racist activism. For both, however, Bo\$\$ represents a complicit victim, whereas male rappers are rendered differently as active criminals.

In Britt's "The Rhythm of Our Blues," published in the *Washington Post* on February 22nd 1994, she adopts a prosaic style reminiscent of Black Arts poets like Amiri Baraka or Ishmael Reed to describe the pain of seeing young African American children imitating the images they see and hear in gangsta rap albums. Calling those betrayed by the genre "the wounded," she opens by framing the differently-disastrous impact of gangsta rap on women and men. She describes seeing a girl on TV who was faceless, such that "all anybody could hear communicating was this girl's leather-bound 'privates,' publicly humping for the camera," and a young man in a wheelchair she met at the mall who seemed to think of his wheels as a trophy earned after being shot. While these two

expositional examples come from personal experiences, the rest of the piece is explicitly based on Britt's reading of the *Wall Street Journal* exposé of Bo\$\$, with Britt explaining that she "saw a story in the Wall Street Journal. About a 'pretty and shy' young woman, a rapper. Grew up in a nice house. With nice parents. Attended a nice private school in one of the nice-est parts of Detroit... She's really nice, say folks who know her."

Britt takes issue with Bo\$\$'s ruthless ascent in the music industry, calling her "Sistah. Gangstah. Image manipulatah," and contrasts her with the boy she saw at the mall, who she describes as "Gyrator, wheelchair rider, gangster rapper." For her, both "haven't a clue as to how hard they sit on the cutting edge, how bloody they're getting. Can't know that we as a people have only recently gotten this good as sculpting our woundedness."⁴⁴ While there is no reason to suspect the authenticity of Britt's pain, it is abundantly clear that she had barely engaged with Bo\$\$'s actual music or image. Hardly one to be reduced to a crotch, Bo\$\$'s persona was tomboyish and aggressively non-sexualized. Her image on the cover of *Born Gangstaz*, for example, contrasts starkly with the stereotype of the video girl that Britt seems to be referring to, as she adopts a stereotypically masculine or 'butch' stance while dressed in an ill-fitting white suite and a black vest while brandishing an assault rifle. It's unclear what the objectified woman has to do with Bo\$\$ at all, as she carefully avoids sexualizing herself in her her music videos as well, dressed in baggy clothes, a bandanna or beanie,

⁴⁴ Donna Britt, "The Rhythm of Our Blues," *Washington Post*, February 22, 1994, B1.

sunglasses, and brandishing a handgun even in the video for the suggestively titled “Recipe of a Hoe.”

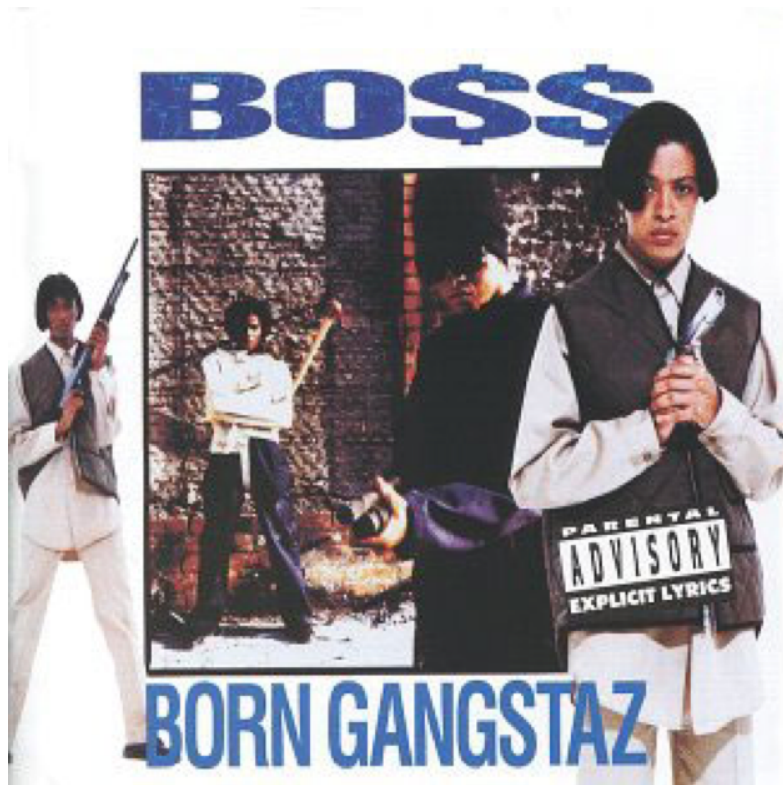


Figure 2.3 – Album Cover of *Born Gangstaz* by Bo\$\$

In fact, Bo\$\$’s androgyny is central to her presentation as someone skilled enough to hang with men without this compromising her heterosexuality or her ability to form special relationships with women, which works as a metaphor for Laws’s actual position within the gangsta rap game as a woman who was able to secure a place in the industry through her skills and drive alone. This is especially evidenced in album skits such as “Thelma and Louise,” where she and her DJ, Dee, find themselves in a shootout with cops. While the two shout at each other as they try to make their escape, Bo\$\$ both references a classic hip hop trope and the tragic – yet triumphant – ending of its namesake film in telling Dee “just keep

going, man. Just don't stop. Just don't stop.⁴⁵ Just keep going." In "A Blind Date With Bo\$\$," she is in her apartment smoking cannabis with two men who want to have sex with her, but ends up robbing them with Dee after excusing herself to go to the bathroom. It is ironic that Britt criticizes Bo\$\$'s childish ignorance for not realizing "a full-screen crotch is anonymous. Has nothing to do with her. That we can't even see her face," when it is instead Britt and the anti-gangsta rap discourse that allows for Bo\$\$'s complex and abundantly self-aware message to be reduced to a female crotch in the popular imagination.

For Britt, it is the squandering of her privileged upbringing and "squandering a past that many impoverished, hurting homegirls could only dream of" that makes Bo\$\$ cross the line from tragically self-destructive to criminally complicit. In prosaic hyperbole, Britt even goes so far as to condemn Bo\$\$ for doing the work of the KKK, writing "David Duke, chill. Save the sheets. We are becoming Bosses at hurting ourselves... Once, black folk were so inefficient as to wait until the wounding was done to us. We've transcended all that, become Michelangelos at chipping away our numbers." In comparing Bo\$\$ to David Duke as well as Michelangelo, Britt articulates a theory of black politics in which poor urban blacks are those who simply have yet to reap the benefits of the integrationist project of the Civil Rights movement. Here, the artistic 'chipping away' of acquired privileges is thought of as an open wound that can be healed

⁴⁵ Variations of the phrase "don't stop" are perhaps the most persistent and iconic trope in hip hop, inspiring the title of perhaps the most comprehensive history of hip hop yet written, Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007). The film *Thelma and Louis* ends with the two female protagonists deciding to "keep going" and drive off of a cliff instead of turning themselves in after being cornered by law enforcement.

through helping poor blacks escape the ravages of poverty by learning to love themselves and trust the middle class ideal that Bo\$\$ indeed problematizes in “Progress of Elimination.” In this regard, Britt and Bo\$\$ do in fact substantially disagree with one another, as they reach drastically different conclusions in how to read class relations between suburban and urban blacks as an analytic for the contemporary state of black existence. Yet, Britt so fundamentally fails to engage with Bo\$\$ as an artist that her article commits the kind of reductive violence to Lichelle Laws as a person that she accuses Laws of committing against poor blacks through her music.

The sexual politics of Bo\$\$’s gangsta rap extend beyond what is found in her lyrics and songs as the interpretation of her music is governed by a sexual politics of anti-gangsta rap discourse. Bo\$\$ herself is framed to be a victim of gangsta rap’s ideological power rather than an actual participant in the genre. For the most part, this discourse centered on the music of male rappers who were said to live a criminal lifestyle and encourage young people to follow in their footsteps. Although the desire to uplift poor African Americans seems to have little to do with the neoconservative project of expanding state control over poor black urban populations through prison building, the War on Drugs, and tough-on-crime policy, both imagine poor and segregated urban spaces as unregulated danger zones and criminal behavior as symptomatic of youthful delusion instead of desperation rooted in systemic inequality, post-industrial joblessness, and survival. For this reason, neoconservative policymakers such as John Carlson, who was the founder of conservative think tank The Washington Policy Institute

and leader of the first statewide “Three Strikes, You’re Out” ballot measure in the country, were also invested in problematizing gangsta rap. In the article “Why the Double Standard When It Comes to Violence?” Carlson directly refers to both *Billboard’s* condemnation of gangsta rappers’ behavior, as well as the *Wall Street Journal’s* exposé of Bo\$\$ while demonstrating ignorance of the actual music of the musicians he writes about.

According to Carlson, the high-profile criminal cases of gangsta rappers contradicts the liberal argument that black criminal behavior is rooted in poverty, and instead points to a cultural cause that is hindered by tough-on-crime policy. Referring to the upcoming criminal trials of Tupac, Flava Flav, and Snoop Doggy Dogg, he writes:

All of these guys could face prison for violent crime. Why? Because they have no job, education or employment skills? Hardly. They are at the top of a billion-dollar industry. But they also embody a culture that sees black women as ‘bitches’ and ‘whores,’ and black men as obsessed with sex, contemptuous of authority, and worthy of respect only in relation to their capacity to kill or maim others. Hmmm. Isn’t that how David Duke sees inner-city black people too? Why are hateful words against blacks regarded as evil if uttered by whites, but tolerated – even rewarded by platinum albums and standing ovations at rap concerts – if shouted by blacks?⁴⁶

This deft polemic crystalizes the sexual politics underlying the logic of color-blind racism, which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva characterizes as an ideology that gained prominence in the late 1960s which “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics.” Under color-blind logic,

⁴⁶ John Carlson, “Why The Double Standard When It Comes To Violence?” *Seattle Times*, February 8, 1994, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19940208&slug=1894100>.

racialized cultural and behavioral expression are said to symptomatic of a mindset of non-whites who use past racism as an excuse for their current-day struggles. Based on a closed reading of Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of a society where "people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin," color-blind racism blames minorities as the ones responsible for America's "race problem," and upholds a confounding model for anti-racist action whereby contemporary racism is a product of African Americans who "play the race card," affirmative action programs, and people of color who "destroy their own communities" instead of uplifting themselves. As a response to the ending of overt segregation enforced through Jim Crow laws, Bonilla-Silva explains, "color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era."⁴⁷

In his piece, Carlson manages to argue that those who fear the criminality of black youth that are not only 'not racist,' but that suppressing gangsta rap would be akin to suppressing the KKK. Here, 'gangsta rap' becomes a signifier overflowing with compounding violences such that it becomes unnecessary to explain how a culture that encourages degrading women is tied to a culture encouraging killing and maiming others on the imagined 'streets.' Rather, an understanding of a badly damaged black masculinity came to account for gangsta rap's doubly-violent lyrics, the bad behavior of gangsta rappers themselves, and

⁴⁷ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Racism Without 'Racists'," *The Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of Oppression and Privilege*, edited by Abby L. Ferber (New York: McGraw-Hill Publications, 2008), 177.

the inability for young black male listeners to separate themselves and their behavior from the violent world constructed by gangsta rappers.

For Carlson, this damaged black masculinity makes the expansion of tough-on-crime policy that explicitly targets young black men, as well as the suppression of gangsta rap, anti-racist. Placing the now-problematized notion of black-on-black crime in relation to gangsta rap, he writes “last year, more black men were killed by other blacks than have died in lynchings throughout the entire history of America. If a car stuffed with skinheads started shooting at black people, unshirted hell would be unleashed. But so long as the perpetrators are black. . . and the victims are black. . . it’s treated just as another incident in the ‘hood. Gangsta rap nourishes and glorifies this mentality. It aims plenty of hatred toward others, especially police. But its essence is self-hatred.” Yet, for all his emphasis on describing black criminality as a problem with masculinity, he, like Britt, narrows his critique upon Bo\$\$, whose music he describes as the “perfect snapshot of these suicidal values.”⁴⁸

Repeating the now-conventional description of Bo\$\$ as a middle-class girl led astray, Carlson explains that “the values she discarded to make it big drive home the febleness of blaming inner-city violence on poverty.” Despite the fact that Bo\$\$ had not been involved in any of her own legal battles, it is enough to refer to her “vulgar, graphic, and incendiary” rap in which she “curses violently, incessantly, brags about her collection of automatic weapons, drinks malt liquor from 40-ounce bottles, and talks about her desire to kill people.” Carlson’s

⁴⁸ Carlson, “Why the Double Standard When It Comes to Violence?”

argument is circular, and it is ultimately unclear how Bo\$\$ supports his attempt at connecting black criminality with the vulgar and brutal depictions of life found in gangsta rap. Rather, it seems like he references Bo\$\$ to reinforce the argument made by Staples, Nelson, and Britt – that gangsta rap has the capacity to do ideological damage to its listeners, and this necessitates a disciplinary intervention. As the misreading of Bo\$\$ by Carlson demonstrates, the association between gangsta rap and black urban criminality was so strong that conservative policy makers were able to garner public support by arguing that gangsta rap – and an black urban criminal ‘culture’ by extension – were more oppressive towards African Americans than predatory laws. In fact, as Carlson’s claim that the refusal to identify African Americans as perpetrators of anti-black crime “brings little comfort to a grieving mother or friend,” supporting laws targeting black male criminals was made to be a loving anti-racist gesture.

The development of an early anti-gangsta rap discourse was a means of codifying a logic that undergirded a wide range of laws and policies that targeted poor urban blacks as a means of protecting the integrity of the ‘black community’ as a whole. This is markedly different than the earlier movements to censor individual gangsta rap songs. Although critics of individual songs like “Fuck Tha Police” and “Cop Killer” focused on how these songs encouraged listeners to commit violence against police and a white-majority society, by the time the genre as a whole came under fire, the discourse came to center on the problem of the genre’s intrinsic undisciplined, unregulated violence in general. It was at this

time that the genre's misogynistic lyrics were scrutinized alongside lyrics depicting gunplay, gang banging, drug dealing, and other criminal activities.

“Violence is an Epidemic in this Country”: The Congressional Hearings on Gangsta Rap

In response to the public morality scare over gangsta rap, three congressional hearings on gangsta rap organized by members of the Congressional Black Caucus took place in 1994, including two hearings before the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness on February 11th and May 5th and the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice on February 23rd. The two hearings were closely related, but approached the genre with nominally different frames. The Senate hearing focused on interrogating gangsta rap's role in encouraging youth gun crime, whereas the House hearings were intended to challenge the music industry's role in capitalizing on violence. Yet, as no proposed legislation regarding the genre was referenced or resulted from either of these hearings, the difference between the sets of hearings is unclear. The fact that the anti-gangsta rap morality panic was so readily adopted by African American political leaders represents the complexity of the racial identity politics of the early 90s. In accounting for the sexual politics of this moment, is also noteworthy that these hearings were primarily organized and led by African American women of the Democratic Party, including Senator Carol Mosely-Braun and Representative Cardiss Collins, who chaired the two hearings, and C. Delores Tucker of the National Political

Congress of Black Women, who requested these hearings to be held. On the other side of the issue, Representative Maxine Waters, who testified in front of both the House and the Senate, was one of the genre's most ardent supporters.

George Lipsitz suggests that while these hearings ostensibly took the appearance of a debate about “culture and crime” and “censorship and social behavior,” they ultimately represent the disavowal of poor urban blacks by the politically powerful Congressional Black Caucus who refused to acknowledge the role Congress played in creating the stark conditions described in gangsta rap songs. He writes that the efforts of the CBC “to censor and suppress gangsta rap music have attempted to obscure the social causes and consequences of disturbing historical changes, rendering as individual and personal experiences that actually have broad-based collective origins and efforts.”⁴⁹ He notes that the multiple censorship campaigns against gangsta rap in the 80s and 90s “did nothing to diminish the amount of misogyny and obscenity in the music’s lyrics,” and only created an environment where the recording industry was discouraged from carrying politically-conscious rap. Indeed, the moral panic against gangsta rap was both a rejection of the genre’s political and artistic validity as well as an act of political disavowal by politicians who refused to take responsibility for the reality of mass institutionalized death represented in violent lyrics.

While I agree with Lipsitz that these hearings did little to fix anything about the reality of violence poor urban blacks faced, I do not think he does

⁴⁹ George Lipsitz, “The Hip Hop Hearings: The Hidden Story of Deindustrialization,” *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 157-158.

enough to account for how these hearings on gangsta rap were related to the congressional hearings over the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which passed the House in its final form on April 21st, 1994, just one month after the first gangsta rap hearings. Approved on a 285 to 141 vote, the bill was the most expensive single piece of anti-crime legislation that was ever signed into law. In addition to funding the hiring of new police officers and building of prisons, this bill added sixty new offenses that would lead to the death penalty, and provided block grants to states to aid in managing gang crime. Beyond its focus on managing youth crime, the bill also included the apparently progressive and pro-feminist “Violence Against Women Act of 1994” and the “Safe Streets for Women Act of 1994” which adopted the rhetoric of protecting women from sexual assault. These acts, however, nevertheless justified the expansion of federal authority on the family structure by imagining sexual assault as a street crime, establishing federal penalties for sex crimes and providing block grants to states and localities “to strengthen effective law enforcement and prosecution strategies to combat violent crimes against women, and to develop strategies to combat violent crimes against women.”⁵⁰

This bill therefore works to suppress the type of criminality said to be depicted in gangsta rap lyrics. By emphasizing preventing gang and youth crime as well as taking a seemingly progressive stance on protecting women from sex crimes, the crime bill performs a similar disavowal of responsibility for the

⁵⁰ Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*. H.R. 3355. 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 23, 1994, 115.

racialized and gendered violence meant to be suppressed through police force and prison expansion that Lipsitz identifies as structuring the gangsta rap hearings. In this regard, both the gangsta rap hearings and the crime bill can be considered acts structured by what Grace Kyungwon Hong calls a ‘neoliberal epistemology of disavowal.’ According to Hong, neoliberalism is an epistemology that is “a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past” by “*affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive respectability, *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death.”⁵¹ According to her analysis, the new political order that established itself during the post-WWII era emerged partly in response to racial liberationist and desegregationist movements, based on a logic where racial progress was celebrated “*as the very mechanism* for the brutal exacerbation of [continued] minoritized death.” In this frame, the struggle for social recognition as a racial group requires the disavowal of those “whose lives are unprotectable, whose social and political statuses are so negligible that they do not merit recognition or protection.”⁵²

In other words, Hong suggests that neoliberal epistemology distinguishes between African American populations that are deserving of protection and those that are deserving of deadly suppression. In an argument that recalls Bo\$S’s critique of upward mobility in “Progress of Elimination,” Hong suggests that in order for individual members of minority groups to move from vulnerable to

⁵¹ Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*

protected, they must disavow those minority group members who are unworthy of protection. The ability for a recognized notion of ‘black community’ able to be celebrated even by white right-wing policymakers requires the separation of the compromising, or criminal, population, which are referenced by racialized but evasively ‘color-blind’ terms such as “prostitute,” “welfare queen,” “thug,” “drug dealer,” or, indeed, “gangster.” In this way, membership within recognized blackness is conditional, and black bodies that are vulnerable to socially-sanctioned violence are rendered something ‘other’ or ‘more’ than black. According to Hong, such terms legitimate violence against a racialized population “without having to explicitly invoke racial, gendered, or sexualized discourse.”⁵³

As Hong makes clear, this ‘logic of disavowal’ allows for a form of difference such as ‘blackness’ to be celebrated by rendering it monolithic, with compromising internal differences along lines of age, class, gender, sexuality, geography etc. acting as grounds for rejection from the group. In the case of both the gangsta rap hearings and the Congressional Black Caucus’s general support of the crime bill, the defiant declarations of African American ‘gangstas’ who openly show contempt for being left behind during a moment of supposed racial and economic progress by taking part in unauthorized economies and inserting these beliefs into the public discourse through gangsta rap threaten the conditional recognition of the ‘black community,’ and thus are disavowed in a performative – and massively consequential – political acts.

⁵³ Ibid., 12.

During the gangsta rap hearings, several of its opponents advocated for the suppression of the genre because of its obscene and violent lyrics which not only ‘did not represent’ the black community, but directly harmed it. In doing so, they often suggested that gangsta rappers were therefore undeserving of constitutionally-guaranteed political protections. In C. Delores Tucker’s testimony, she states that “obscenity has long been an exception to first amendment rights of free speech... obscenity is not a protected form of speech under the U.S. Constitution.”⁵⁴ Although Senator Carol Moseley-Braun made it clear in her opening remarks that the hearing was “not about government censorship” she includes the caveat that the first amendment “does not say that corporations should take no responsibility to monitor the content of material they market to the public.” While the argument for government censorship of products within the open market may superficially appear to be antithetical to neoliberal ideology, it becomes clear that the censorship of gangsta rap was akin to passage of tough-on-crime policies as a social corrective that would create a more efficient marketplace. In other words, the suppression of gangsta rap was a means of allowing the rest of society to remain unregulated.

Tucker, for example, explains that “racism and greed are the sustaining forces behind gangster rap,” and suggests that “the full authority of government should be used to restrict access of music and videos to minors. In particularly

⁵⁴ Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*, 103rd cong., 2nd sess., February 23rd, 1994, 13.

egregious instances, Congress should put forth measures to remove the offending product from the marketplace.” She continues by making the case that gangsta rap is not only obscene, but threatens to substantially disrupt American social stability and destroy the racial progress made possible by black civil rights leaders who made the black middle class ideal possible. After citing Coretta Scott King’s “State of the Dream Address,” Tucker explains that “those of us... who have taken up the mantle of this crusade to save our children have been arduously working on eliminating the root causes of the social ills plaguing our communities... this battle against the negative effects of gangster rap is an important element in our struggle to uplift the African American community and America as a Nation.” Beyond being obscene and thus socially and morally disruptive, gangsta rap was said to have a major role in encouraging black youth to commit crimes. In no uncertain terms, she explains “being coaxed by gangster rap ... [black youth] will trigger a crime wave of epidemic proportions that we have never seen the likes of.”⁵⁵

Tucker makes the connection between gangsta rap’s imposing threat of a crime epidemic and the destruction of civil rights ideals just as openly in her testimony to the House of Representatives, which she begins by invoking the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. and suggesting that if he were alive today, “he would be leading a nationwide crusade to restore the deteriorating moral values of this Nation,” because “the reality of the 1990s is that the greatest fear in the African American community does not come from earthquakes, floods or fires,

⁵⁵ Ibid.

but from violence, the kind of violence that has already transformed our communities and schools into warzones where children are dodging bullets instead of balls, and planning their own funerals.” She then repeats a refrain from her testimony to the Senate, saying “this explains why so many of our children are out of control and why we have more black males in jail than we have in college.”⁵⁶

Although she shows ambivalence over prison building, Tucker proposes a number of social reforms that would effectively imprison black youth in urban settings. In her testimony to the Senate, she advocates for public-private partnerships to create live-in schools (implicitly for poor urban blacks) “as a weapon to combat today’s violence,” as well as converting military bases into training academies for youth offenders, which she suggests “could be put to good use by giving youth the skills they need to be productive citizens.” In this sense, it is important to understand that the regulation of gangsta rap was not so much thought about as a form of market regulation, but the imposition of neoliberal values on a surplus population as a means of making it productive again.

In considering the neoliberal capitalist motivations of the congressional hearings, it should be noted that Tucker and others in her activist circle had financial stakes in the rap industry. Tucker equivocates suppressing the genre with suppressing urban black youth, and does so by exploiting the anti-gangsta rap and anti-criminal moral panic for political and financial gain. According to an exposé

⁵⁶ Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Music Lyrics and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 11 and May 5, 1994, 5.

by Chuck Phillips, Tucker became involved in anti-gangsta rap activism only after several failed bids for public office, due to her inability to escape controversies from her past. In 1977, she was fired from her position as commonwealth secretary of Pennsylvania after being accused of using her position for personal gain by having state employees write speeches for which she collected large honorariums. Before being appointed commonwealth secretary, Tucker had previously come under fire for problems with property management in Philadelphia. Phillips notes that a 1966 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article called her family one of the worst slumlords in the city, and the majority of the buildings she owned were boarded up during the 1970s after being cited for offenses such as succession of tax, safety, and health code violations.⁵⁷

Part of her strategy in her anti-gangsta rap crusade was to buy stakes in Time Warner, the parent company of the Death Row label which represented Snoop Doggy Dogg, so she would be entitled to attend shareholder meetings. According to Death Row CEO Suge Knight, who filed a lawsuit against her in 1996 for contractual interference, extortion, and unfair business practices, Tucker was interested in acquiring creative and financial control of Death Row Records, at one point asking Knight to sign a document designating her as the exclusive representative of Death Row so as to “negotiate a new ‘clean’ rap venture” with Time Warner.⁵⁸ It seems that Tucker’s purpose in the congressional hearings was not only to criticize the genre, but to create the opportunity to capitalize on the

⁵⁷ Chuck Philips, “Anti-Rap Crusader Under Fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1996, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-03-20/news/mn-49205_1_c-delores-tucker.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

movement to replace gangsta rap with ‘positive’ rap. Notably, she was even given the opportunity at the end of the Senate hearing to promote her “positive rap” group called Peace in the Hood, who were able to perform a number. According to Tucker, Peace in the Hood were represented by the Entertainment Commission co-chaired by other NPCBW members Dionne Warwick, Melba Moore, and Terry Rossi, and were supposedly unable to get signed to a major label because they refused to exploit America’s obsession with violence as gangsta rap did.⁵⁹

Tucker’s exploitation of the gangsta rap moral panic and desire to capitalize upon its corrective measures parallel the rise of the private prison industry in the 1980s and 90s, which Angela Davis notes was a means of “concentrating and managing [populations that] the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be surplus” by turning them into state-sponsored producers and consumers, effectively creating an economy for populations ravaged by post-industrial joblessness.⁶⁰ Davis notes that the prison-industrial complex is multifaceted and prison reform activists must therefore extend their critiques beyond the actual institution of the prison itself, to include the many corporate and political entities able to profit from the carceral system that emerged in the 80s and 90s. In the case of the gangsta rap hearings, this includes all those profiting from the anti-crime frenzy. In arguing that gangsta rap’s obscenity extended beyond the limits of what was considered protected speech and

⁵⁹ Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Music Lyrics and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 11 and May 5, 1994, 105.

⁶⁰ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 91.

attempting to profit from the ‘disciplining’ of the industry, Tucker and others in the NPCBW, Inc. similarly tried to impose investable value on a genre that was characterized as ‘surplus,’ or excessive to the point of it effectively being a form of violence itself.

This logic of disavowal structured much of the black political elite’s discussion of the crime problem, as well. African American politicians and leaders often expressed a concern over the racist implications of crime suppression, but were equally concerned about the large amount of crime coming from within African American communities. One way that this problem was accounted for was to blame undisciplined and misguided young African Americans for committing the majority of crimes against black people. The month before the congressional hearings on rap and days after the crime bill passed the Senate, a group of prominent black politicians, scholars, ministers, celebrities, and community leaders met for a conference on youth crime organized by Rev. Jesse Jackson to discuss the problem of crime in African American communities. During the conference, the issue of ‘black-on-black crime’ was discussed, with Jackson telling the press after the conference about four shootings that occurred near his home in the past months and that the problem had become so pervasive that “we have come to accept it as normal.”⁶¹ During the conference, Jackson told attendees that “violence – particularly black-on-black violence – is not a secret,” and rallied African Americans to be proactive in the fight against crime, telling

⁶¹ Steven A. Holmes, “Prominent Blacks Meet to Search for an Answer to Mounting Crime,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/08/us/prominent-blacks-meet-to-search-for-an-answer-to-mounting-crime.html>.

them that “if change is to come, it must come from the bottom up, not top down... if change is to come, the victims of violence – the black community – must stand up.”⁶² While he argued that the roots of crime in the black community were poverty, jobless, and lack of quality education, he also placed blame on the “BBB,” or the “Bad Black Brother” who ravaged African American communities with crime.

While members of the CBC attended this conference to present an alternative measure to the crime bill that emphasized spending on prevention over punishment, the consensus that emerged among the elite and politically-powerful conference-goers was that crime was one of the most pressing problems facing African Americans. C. Delores Tucker spoke at this conference as well, arguing that misogynistic and inflammatory lyrics of gangsta rap provoked abuse against black women.⁶³ For his part, Jackson decried the extent that rap artists betrayed the black revolutionary tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela, saying that “you can’t wear a Malcolm X hat and call women bitches. You can’t wear a Mandela T-shirt and call us niggers.”⁶⁴

Also in attendance was Carol Moseley-Braun, who was herself heavily invested in the promise of cracking down on crime by targeting young people. As

⁶² James Bock, “‘Stand Up’ to Violence, Jackson Urges Blacks,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 8, 1994, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-01-08/news/1994008016_1_youth-violence-black-on-black-violence-epidemic-of-violence.

⁶³ Holmes, “Prominent Black Meet to Search for an Answer to Mounting Crime.”

⁶⁴ Cox News Service, “Summit Targets ‘Bad Black Brother’ As Key to Violence,” *Orlando Sentinel*, January 7, 1994, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1994-01-07/news/9401070055_1_jackson-black-violence.

the first black woman to win a seat in the senate, the first legislative proposal Moseley-Braun authored was a provision for the Senate version of the crime bill that would allow 13-year-olds to be tried as adults for gun crimes. In a luncheon with reporters for the *Chicago Tribune* in October of 1993, Moseley-Braun stated “the question is, do we treat juvenile criminals like criminals or like juveniles? I believe the philosophical basis and practical basis for separating juveniles out of the criminal justice system that existed 100 years ago, when all this reform happened, no longer exists.”⁶⁵ While this proposal may seem at odds with the senator’s otherwise liberal and racially-conscious platform, her efforts in negotiating tougher sentencing for juvenile offenders were thought to be ultimately good for the black community as a whole.

Because of her personal ties to the members of the CBC who organized the hearings, Tucker was shielded from direct criticism. For example, at one point during the Senate hearing, Darryl James, editor-in-chief of the rap newspaper *Rap Sheet*, argued against Tucker stating that “rap music is being convicted for the alleged crimes of a handful of rap artists who are using what is perhaps the only vehicle that they possess to express frustration about their environment.” Rather than rap being the cause of a criminal mentality, James pointed out that youth disenfranchisement was due to policies of the Reagan administration and “the non-action of self-appointed black leaders” including Dr. Tucker and others “who misrepresent themselves as representatives of the masses only to serve to fan the

⁶⁵ Elaine S. Povich, “Moseley-Braun Bill Would Try Some 13-year-olds as Adults,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 27, 1993, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-10-27/news/9310270120_1_sen-carol-moseley-braun-crime-bill-anti-crime-legislation.

flames of controversy.” In response, Senator Moseley-Braun reprimanded James and stated that “the purpose of this hearing is not and never has been to blame the victims... I think that it is unfortunate to have as part of the testimony blaming the fighters for social justice for the failures of their struggle” and went on to defend Tucker’s credentials, calling her “someone who has devoted her life to trying to make things better, to bring attention to things like education and job creation, and to get people to pay attention, Mr. James, to the very things you are talking about.”⁶⁶

Although James was reprimanded for making a personal attack against Tucker, it is important to take his critique seriously. As Tucker’s attempt at associating gangsta rap’s obscenity with criminality and advocating for government suppression suggests, the suppression of gangsta rap did indeed seem to be being “convicted of crimes” and suppressed so as to prevent further crimes from taking place. At a time when congress was debating legislation meant to cull the problem of social violence on the national level, gangsta rap was being described as a form of criminal violence itself. Over the course of the hearings, gangsta rap’s connection to violence was constantly reiterated by its detractors. In Senator Moseley-Braun’s opening remarks, she justified the need for extended hearings on gangsta rap by giving a detailed account of violence in contemporary America. After stating “As anyone who watches the news or picks up a paper is aware, violence is quickly becoming this Nation’s number one public health

⁶⁶ Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*, 103rd cong., 2nd sess., February 23rd, 1994, 56-57.

problem,” she lays out a theory of the media’s influence on encouraging youth to participate in violent crime:

Nowhere is this problem more pronounced than among our Nation’s children. Childhood for all too many has ceased to be a time of innocence and instead has become a daily struggle to stay alive. Seven-year-old children are gun down on their walk to school, while 11-year-olds make plans for their funerals.

Of course the young are no longer merely the victims of violence. They are also the perpetrators. Between 1987 and 1991, arrests for murder among the general population rose 21 percent. However, among juveniles, that increase was a shocking 85 percent.

Even more alarming is the link between violent juvenile crime and guns. Juveniles now account for 1 out of every 5 weapons arrests in the country, and approximately 135,000 students carry guns to school every day.

The causes for this dramatic escalation in youth crime and violence are numerous. Poverty, the breakdown of the family, the lack of real education and job opportunities are all issues which have to be addressed. But there is another contributing factor that we can no longer afford to ignore. As a society, particularly our young children are becoming increasingly desensitized to violence. Media images of murder, assault and rap bombard us on a daily basis...

According to a 1989 report in the *Journal of American Medicine*, between 7th and 12th grades the average teenager listens to 10,500 hours of music, an amount that is slightly less than the number of hours spent in school from kindergarten through high school. To deny that this music has an impact on our children is not merely naïve, it is irresponsible.⁶⁷

Though she deploys a color-blind rhetoric, Mosely-Braun’s words express an anxiety about youth crime and stability within African American communities in particular. Instead of showing a concern for the well-being of black youth living in violent neighborhoods, Mosely-Braun instead treats black youth as the source

⁶⁷ Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*, 103rd cong., 2nd sess., February 23rd, 1994, 4-5.

of violence. For her, gangsta rap is regarded as a bridge or ‘gateway genre,’ so to speak, that opponents used to delineate between the youth in need of protection and the youth in need of discipline. In this regard, the movement to suppress gangsta rap was part of a contemporaneous movement intended to impose discipline on especially black urban youth. As the congressional hearings over gangsta rap’s obscenity were led by politically-powerful African American women, including C. Delores Tucker, Senator Mosely-Braun, and Representative Cardiss Collins, it is important to interrogate the extent that these critics used their power to not only suppress gangsta rap, but also the black youth whose behavior was said to undermine black progress.

Heteropatriarchy and the Black Family: The Neoliberal Sexual Politics of Gangsta Rap Discourse

Ultimately what seems to be at stake in the anti-crime and anti-gangsta rap discourses was not so much a threat of criminal takeover, but the building and maintenance of an alternative social order in post-industrial urban spaces to replace the one previously maintained by the industrial economy. Insofar as the suppressive political response to mass racialized joblessness in urban centers like South Central Los Angeles was premised on the creation of a threat of undisciplined and pathologically hypermasculine black youth with guns, this neoliberalizing project can be said to have been substantially based on renegotiating various forms of a social difference in the early 1990s. In this new

social order, racist political suppression via prison expansion would be justified as anti-racist, anti-misogynistic, and pro-youth.

In this regard, the rejection of gangsta rap by African American political leaders can be understood as a means of reaffirming the possibility for normative blackness to exist in a contemporary integrated society. This was achieved through fashioning gangsta rap as an excessive, undisciplined – and therefore ‘violent’ – expression of blackness in need of management. As its critics so explicitly and repeatedly expressed, the problem with gangsta rap was its defiant expression of an ill-defined notion of *violence*. While the individual victims of said violence are generally abstractly identified through crime statistics, the very fabric of society and the future of black political recognition was often implied to be what gangsta rap undermined. Thus, the apparently feminist rhetoric opposing misogyny in rap was more fundamentally undergirded by an anxiety about the need to impose discipline on a population whose non-heteropatriarchal family structures threatened the well-being of society overall. In this regard, the opposition to gangsta rap was able to transcend racial, sexual, and political lines because it was based on the normative claim that the integrity of the black community rested upon its ability to reproduce responsibly so as to impose neoliberal values upon black youth.

Joining in the opposition to gangsta rap gave upward-looking African Americans a means of achieving mainstream recognition by working to impose neoliberal discipline upon less powerful black populations. Andrea Smith has argued that because Western coloniality has historically imposed both a gender

binary system and naturalized a patriarchal family structure on colonial subjects, “heteropatriarchy is the building block of U.S. empire.”⁶⁸ The fundamental purpose of heteropatriarchy was to invest in the private family to “make it more difficult for people to invest in more public forms of social connection” and also normalized suburban life by masking economic disinvestment in urban areas.⁶⁹ Post-colonial feminist philosopher María Lugones similarly suggests that accounting for how patriarchal heterosexuality is not only “normative,” but “violently exercised across the colonial modern gender system so as to construct a worldwide system of power” allows for an intersectional critique of race, class, gender, and sexuality that overcomes the indifference to sexual violence against women of color that she associates with ‘white’ feminism as well as from racialized male subjects who center their theories of liberation on imposing heterosexism on their communities.⁷⁰ As intersectional feminist theorists, Hong, Smith, and Lugones all insist on being wary of the potential for anti-racist critiques to reinforce heteropatriarchy and heterosexism and thus make violence against women and sexual minorities of color part of the process of liberation.

The locus of power that the prison industrial complex and welfare reform worked upon became the implicitly-black family rather than African Americans writ large, because it was argued that the discipline that was lacking among black

⁶⁸ Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, edited by Andrea Lee Smith, Beth E. Richie, Julia Sudbury, and Janelle White (Boston: South End Press, 2006), 71.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ María Lugones, “Heterosexism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 187.

urban youth could be imposed by attentive parents within a heteropatriarchal family unit. However, insofar as the populations being scrutinized were conceived of as surplus, imposing order upon the urban black family was also a means of minimizing the production of literal surplus value the posed a burden upon the post-industrial economy. Indeed, controlling poor black reproduction so as to alleviate the burden this population posed to the economy was one of the effects of the prison industrial complex. Imprisoning young men in private or semi-private prisons during their most reproductive years turns bodies that are non-productive and hyper-reproductive into ones that are non-reproductive and whose consumption is regulated. Angela Davis, for example, notes that the public-private structure of the prison industrial complex is a means of providing corporations a means of transforming non-productive bodies “into sources of profit who consume and also often produce all kinds of commodities.”⁷¹

The focus on undisciplined youth as the cause of violence during the congressional hearings similarly emphasized the need for disciplining the black family structure. For example, Deputy Medical Director of the American Psychiatric Association Dr. Robert T.M. Phillips echoed Carol Moseley-Braun telling her that she was correct to have suggested in her opening statement that “violence was an epidemic in this country,” and adds that “it is pandemic in this country and is our greatest public health crisis.” Citing black youth homicide rates, Phillips gives a litany of examples of social violence within which gangsta rap was entangled, including “substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy,

⁷¹ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 88.

truancy and dropping out” as well as “the deterioration of our family units and the absence of strong and consistent male and female role models.” While Phillips appeals to the importance of considering the “emotional and physical well-being of our children,” his fears about gangsta rap are more rooted in a concern over obscene language’s ability to interfere with the ability of family and social structures to sustain themselves.

As Phillips makes clear, the victim of gangsta rap’s sexist lyrics were not said to be women who are individually harmed through linguistic violence. Rather, gangsta rap’s obscene lyrics pointed to a crisis of values. As he explains “music is clearly the homing device for language by which we track the culture and mores of our society.” When he recites sexist lyrics from N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police,” he suggests that these they are responsible for a generalized desensitization to violence among youth listeners. In this regard, gangsta rap’s violent sexual politics are more existential than they may initially appear. They are not violent on a personal level, but on a generational one. Asserting that “freedom of speech does not relieve artists, recording executives, or broadcasters of their responsibility to serve the public interest... one’s constitutionally guaranteed first amendment right does not give license to do harm to others,” Phillips suggests that the need to suppress this distillation of disruptive values upon the youth was urgent to the point where it was necessary to bypass artists’ and listeners’ constitutional rights.

In referencing the deterioration of the black family, Phillips outlines a racial and sexual politics of gangsta rap’s violence that centers notions of racial

progress on the status of the black family unit. A similar anxiety is reflected in the statements of many of the genre's critics who testified during the hearings. Moseley-Braun lists "the breakdown of the family" alongside poverty and lack of educational and job opportunities as causes for a "dramatic escalation in youth crime and violence."⁷² Sergeant Ron Stallworth of the Utah Department of Public Safety's Division of Investigation, who takes a much more understanding response to gangsta rap and advocates for critics to listen with empathy towards the emotional pain the music often depicts, characterizes a rising youth gang problem in Utah that has extended to include "good white, middle-class Mormon kids." This is surprising because, according to him, the stereotype of gang members is that they are young and "come from poor family backgrounds, a single-parent environment. Usually mom is the one in the household. The father has long since flown the coop and they are on welfare."⁷³ Dionne Warwick makes it particularly clear that gangsta rap's sexist violence is violence against the black family:

If the continuation of negative exposure by a medium that is showing distorted look at images of male-female relationships, the constant undermining of our family stability, encouragement of violence, abuse and sexism is acceptable and it is acceptable as a behavior in perpetuating the cycle of low self-esteem of our youth, expressly African American youth, we then must be able to see and feel the effect of this gangster rap.⁷⁴

⁷² Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music*, 103rd cong., 2nd sess., February 23rd, 1994, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 86

An account of the sexual politics of gangsta rap therefore needs to extend beyond the sexist lyrics identified by its detractors to include the how the supposed deterioration of the black family was more fundamentally at stake. This is a discourse that extends to the end of the Civil Rights Movement which was used to account for sustained differences in the status of black and white populations after the abolition of state-enforced segregation policies through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The notion that ruptures in the black family prevented progress within the black community was formally outlined in a 1965 report authored by Lyndon b. Johnson's Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan titled "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action," informally known as the "Moynihan Report."

Warning that "The United States is approaching a new crisis in race relations," the Moynihan report distinguishes between a black middle-class suburban population that has "managed to save itself" and poor black urban populations that are trapped within a cycle of poverty and disadvantage through the differences in their typical family structures, and advocates for "a national effort... that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government... directed to a new kind of goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure."⁷⁵ Moynihan describes the family structure typical of many black urban families as being affected by higher-than-average rates of divorce and illegitimate births, such that an inordinate number of black families are headed by women who are dependent on welfare. He devotes his fourth chapter to outline

⁷⁵ US Department of Labor Office of Policy Planning and Research. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," Patrick Moynihan, March 1965, Preface.

the consequences of this family structure, which he claims constitute a “Tangle of Pathology,” including Matriarchy, The Failure of Youth, Delinquency and Crime, The Armed Forces (which refers to high rates of conscription), and Alienation.⁷⁶ Grace Kyungwon Hong notes that the Moynihan Report can be seen as an early instance of neoliberal power, in that it was fixated on regulating both black female sexuality and irresponsible black male reproductive excess so as to constitute black urban communities as populations in need of state help and care.⁷⁷ In effectively erecting a banner of respectability that bridged the helpless poor urban matriarchal family and the self-sufficient middle class suburban patriarchal family, Hong argues that the Moynihan Report inducted black communities with both repressive and disciplinary power. She suggests a reading of the report that acknowledges the paradox between the “*rhetoric of care*” which ultimately “renders such communities more deviant and punishable.”⁷⁸

In other words, the Moynihan report not only outlines a correlation between black poverty and the pathological structure of the black family, but it also advocates for the black family structure to be a site for government intervention and an ideological goalpost that African Americans vying for political recognition needed to uphold. On the one hand, by contrasting the structures of urban and suburban black families, the Moynihan Report helped advocate for an end to racially-restrictive housing covenants that were used by

⁷⁶ Ibid., 29-47.

⁷⁷ Grace Kyungwon Hong, “Neoliberalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 56-67.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 60.

property owners to disallow African Americans from purchasing homes. These covenants began to proliferate during the African American Great Migration beginning in the 1910s. Though the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that courts could not enforce these covenants in *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948, it was not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 following the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. that these covenants were outlawed in their entirety.

However, by arguing that the urban black family structure itself was responsible for the abject conditions faced by African Americans rather than the policies and practices used to maintain racial segregation, the Moynihan Report remains grounded in a color-blind logic that made urban African Americans responsible for overcoming their own discrimination. However, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 only nominally prevented residential housing discrimination. Priscilla Ocen argues that the black exclusion from white-identified areas has been maintained through a variety of seemingly race neutral means such as opposition to affordable and public housing developments, implicitly racially-restrictive school zoning, and the use of law enforcement to police boundaries through the rhetoric of welfare and crime.⁷⁹

While urban non-white communities were targets of these discriminatory practices as a means of maintaining racial separation, Lisa McGirr argues that white denizens of wealthy suburbs such as in Orange County, California were the “ground forces” of an important political shift that was taking place at the same

⁷⁹ Priscilla A. Ocen, “The New Racially Restrictive Covenant: Race, Welfare, and the Policing of Black Women in Subsidized Housing,” *UCLA L. Rev.*, (2012): 1542.

time during which conservatism underwent a transformation from a marginal political movement preoccupied with rooting out communism to a mainstream electoral contender focused instead on the threat of “enemies within our own communities and families.”⁸⁰ By the 1990s, Mike Davis writes, the “most powerful ‘social movement’ in contemporary California is that of affluent homeowners... engaged in defense of home values and neighborhood exclusivity.”⁸¹

As the Moynihan Report placed blame on the matriarchal structure of black households for producing deviant youth would suggest, the policing of black motherhood through welfare as well as youth behavior through prison expansion should be seen as part of the same logic that justified continued racial separation into the 1990s by focusing on the supposed inability of poor urban African Americans to discipline maintain their own households without government suppression. The association between black crime and gendered and racialized stereotypes of “welfare queens” giving birth to “crack babies” that emerged in the 1980s and 90s similarly implies that the anti-crime discourse was accompanied by a preoccupation with the generation of future black families. As such, the sexual politics of mass incarceration, or the “networked system of laws, policies customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status” of African Americans that Michelle Alexander has deemed the

⁸⁰ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 15.

⁸¹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 153.

“New Jim Crow” was invested both in the imprisonment of mostly-male young African Americans as well as the regulation of black motherhood.⁸²

A central irony of the backlash against gangsta rap is that it is rhetorically anti-misogynistic but committed to upholding heteropatriarchal ways of being. While gangsta rap is often criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes of black people, it is important to recognize that the suppressive discourse against gangsta rap involved an imagination of a similar-but-different cast of racist tropes. While gangsta rap was said to be filled with images of street-dwellers like gangsters, hustlers, pimps, and hos, the anti-gangsta rap and tough-on-crime discourse was filled with threatening figures centered on the notion of the broken home, such as gun-toting and gang-banging uneducated youth, absent fathers, welfare queens, and crack babies. As these competing sets of images allude to, the interpretation of gangsta rap as a fundamentally sexist and violent genre is in many ways a misinterpretation based on responding to a discourse about the genre rather than a close reading of the genre itself. This misinterpretation is upheld through a series of structuring dialectics between street/home, city/suburb, and production/reproduction. In other words, the (mis)interpretation of gangsta rap sees representations of violence on the streets is as an indication of a crisis of the home, the poverty and lack of institutional support for urban blacks as an indication of the lack of suburban-centric family values, and the problem of joblessness and part-time hourly labor resulting in the outsourcing of industrial

⁸² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

production to be ultimately a problem tied to the hyper-reproduction of the communities in question.

Too Misogynistic, Not Heteropatriachal: Towards a Sexual Politics of Gangsta Rap

The contemporary notion that gangsta rap's misogyny undermines its political and artistic credibility is such a widely-held belief that it is uncomfortable for many to take its artistic and political value seriously. In response to the 2015 N.W.A. biopic *Straight Outta Compton*, prominent feminist and atheist scholar Sikivu Hutchinson calls the group "gangsta rap pioneers and beneficiaries of the corporatization of rap/hip hip in the 1990s" in an essay published on the *Huffington Post*, and cites songs such as "To Kill a Hooker," "Findum, Fuckum & Flee" and "One Less Bitch" to suggest that "in song after song, gang rape, statutory rape, the coercion of women into prostitution and the terroristic murder of prostitutes are chronicles, glorified and paid homage to as just part of the spoils of 'ghetto' life."⁸³ According to her, it is dangerous to "come full circle" to celebrate the genre that has taught girls that violence against them is normal, or even assumed to violence against them is part of the project of ending racist police violence.

I agree with Hutchinson in that it is important not to uncritically uplift a genre known equally for its unwavering opposition to police oppression and its

⁸³ Sikivu Hutchinson, "Straight Outta Rape Culture," *Huffington Post*, August 5, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sikivu-hutchinson/straight-outta-rape-cultu_b_7942554.html.

violent renderings of black women as subhuman sexual commodities. To do so would be to fall under the trappings of the logic of disavowal where poor urban black males are worthy of advocacy but the violence faced by poor urban black women is ‘beyond the scope’ of contemporary anti-racist struggle. Yet, the wholesale disavowal of gangsta rap as a genre because of its sexual politics does not account for how the critiques made in gangsta rap have framed contemporary intersectional struggles in an important way. It is hard to imagine an intersectional anti-violence movement like Black Lives Matter being able to take such a prominent position in contemporary discourse if songs such as N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police” and “Straight Outta Compton” hadn’t convinced a whole generation of listeners of the reality of racist police violence.

Gangsta rap currently exists in a state of limbo where acknowledging the genre’s oppositional politics means undermining the critiques of contemporary rape culture and violence against black women, while disavowing the genre on grounds of these critiques means rendering the voices of a surplus population illegible. For this reason, I believe that the challenge for contemporary scholars is to develop a critique that goes beyond disavowal and instead works to resolve existing contradictions in contemporary discourse that make disavowal the only possible response. For gangsta rap, this means interrogating the problem of why it is known to be both politically-conscious and deeply misogynistic. As I have attempted to show, this understanding of the genre has been constructed by its opponents who had political stakes in institutionalizing the disavowal of both the genre and the surplus population of black men and women living in post-

industrial spaces. In framing the genre as internally irreconcilable, the ‘problem of gangsta rap’ was said to be the cause of all the problems fracturing black identity in the 1990s.

Yet, this discursive construction of gangsta rap which made misogyny part of its core identity was built upon a central contradiction – that the gangsta rap was both fundamentally misogynistic and hopelessly anti-heteropatriarchal. While misogyny and heteropatriarchy are not mutually exclusive, it is problematic to uphold heteropatriarchy as a means of combatting misogyny as this means interpreting the expansion of state power through such means as prison expansion to be benevolent interventions on interpersonal violence. Judith Butler even references the attack on rap, which she too readily associates exclusively with conservatives, to caution against readings of ‘linguistic violence’ or ‘injurious speech’ that support the notion where “sexual injury to women is understood through racial tropes: the dignity of women is understood to be under attack not by the weakening of rights to reproductive freedom and the widespread loss of public assistance, but primarily by African-American men who sing.”⁸⁴

One of the most confounding consequences of this neoliberal project of interpreting gangsta rap is that it resulted in the construction of a genre that is almost entirely devoid of women’s voices. Because the notion of ‘gangsta rap’ as a genre signifier emerged several years after the release of the songs that would come to define the genre, this structured absence of women in gangsta rap is a quality of the suppressive discourse that can work as a site for analysis. In other

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 23.

words, I suggest that the notion that gangsta rap is a genre without women rappers is a construct based on a criminalizing reading of the songs, albums, and artists that constituted the Los Angeles rap scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this regard, the construction of a 'gangsta rap canon' that includes, for instance, N.W.A. but not H.W.A., Ice Cube but not Yo-Yo, and Snoop Dogg but not Lady of Rage, so as to make the genre stand for the crisis of black identity in the neoliberal 90s is based on a logic where disavowal becomes a means of collecting bodies for the sake of imposing regulation. Within this structure of interpretation, neoliberal ideology governs the filtering of gangsta rap songs for the purposes of supporting the management of surplus populations.

With this understanding, resisting the logic of neoliberal disavowal means reinserting women rappers into the discourse of gangsta rap to examine how they can contribute to our understanding of this sexist but anti-heteropatriarchal genre. While it must be acknowledged that there are some truly abject renderings of women within gangsta rap by men, these depictions have been given undue primacy and power to harm through the wholesale exclusion of women rappers who, as I will show in the following chapter, had been responding to this very problem by creating their own oppositional representations for years before the genre came under public scrutiny.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN RAPPERS AND THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF GANGSTA RAP

Rap remains almost completely dominated by black males and this mind-set. Although women have been involved in rap since at least the mid-80's, record companies have only recently begun to promote them. And as women rappers like Salt-n-Pepa, Monie Love, M. C. Lyte, L. A. Star and Queen Latifah slowly gain more visibility, rap's sexism may emerge as a subject for scrutiny. Indeed, the answer may lie with women, expressing in lyrics and videos the tensions between the sexes in the black community.

- Michelle Wallace, "Pop View - When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap"

Spit Her Name: The Purpose of Gangsta Rap Feminism

When Michelle Wallace wrote these words in the *New York Times* on July 29, 1990, rap was only starting to garner mainstream attention with hits by popular and mostly inoffensive artists. The top-selling rap album so far that year was MC Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em*, and the first rap song to ever reach the number one position on the *Billboard* charts, Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby," was released earlier that month. The average reader of the *New York Times* likely would have heard about rappers like Public Enemy, Ice-T, and N.W.A., but was just becoming introduced to the musical genre that would eventually change the American and international musical landscape.⁸⁵

In this essay, Wallace responds to a growing criticism of rap music for its sometimes problematic sexual politics, and ultimately expresses ambivalence, calling rap's sexism a "necessary evil." She identifies two problematic responses

⁸⁵ Michelle Wallace, "When Black Feminism Faces the Music, and the Music is Rap," *New York Times*, July 29, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/29/arts/pop-view-when-black-feminism-faces-the-music-and-the-music-is-rap.html?pagewanted=all>.

to rap sexism as “those who have wrongly advocated censorship of rap’s more sexually explicit lyrics,” and “those who have excused the misogyny because of its basis in black oral traditions.” Wallace recognizes that rap music is important for calling attention to economic, cultural, and social struggles faced by black youth, but nevertheless criticizes the extent that rap lyrics often work to silence women and leave them out of the movement. For her, the solution would be to pay attention to the voices of women rappers like Salt-n-Pepa, Monie Love, M.C. Lyte, L.A. Star and Queen Latifah, whose music was able to subvert rap’s sexism by representing themselves alongside men, and “not just in artificial female ghettos.”⁸⁶

In responding to criticisms of rap’s sexism by centering on the positive work done by women rappers, Wallace helps lay the groundwork for what would become a major task for hip hop feminists in the following years. The notion of ‘hip hop feminism’ as a distinct form of feminist critique was introduced by Joan Morgan in her 1999 book *When Chickenheads come Home to Roost*, where she describes hip hop as a space where artists and listeners can develop the language to describe contemporary struggles black women face within their own communities and broader society. Noting that “the real crime” in hip hop is not name-calling by men, but “their failure to love us – to be our brothers in the way that we commit ourselves to being their sistas,” she insists that a hip hop feminist response to its misogyny is not to disavow it, but by “recognizing that its

⁸⁶ Ibid.

illuminating, informative narration and its incredible ability to articulate our collective pain is an invaluable tool when examining gender relations.”⁸⁷

For her and other foundational hip hop feminist scholars like Tricia Rose, Gwendolyn Brooks, Cheryl Keyes, and others, there is a need for a feminism that develops an account of the lives of black women whose liberation from violence within their communities does not mean supporting institutional violence against black men who are part of their lives. An important aspect of hip hop feminism is therefore seeing rap music as a type of living archive that renders otherwise unarticulated experiences visible. According to Morgan, this means developing a feminism that sees black women’s oppressions in relation to – rather than caused by or the cause of – black men’s oppression.

Although in the previous chapter I wrote extensively about institutions that targeted black men that were being developed in the 1990s, black women rendered surplus were certainly impacted by prisons, welfare cuts, and reproductive control as well. Their experiences were, however, much less visible and openly discussed than black men’s. Whereas poor urban black men were imagined as unruly subjects who actively threatened the neoliberal social order through irresponsible acts, black women were more often imagined as wombs and mothers in relation to the subjects they produced, raised, or were victimized by.

Feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has criticized how the narrow focus of notions of black advocacy that centers on plights of black males not only

⁸⁷ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 74, 80.

leaves black women behind, but misrepresents the nature of racial violence and prevents concrete steps from being taken to address the inequality faced by women and girls of color. For Crenshaw, who coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in the 1980s, this is a problem that persists to the present day. In a recent essay published in the *Washington Post* titled “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” she explains that intersectionality is rooted in the need for advocacy to be based on a lucid understanding of structures of power: “The better we understand how identities and power work together from one context to another, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture.”⁸⁸

In a report released by the African American Policy Forum introducing the hashtag #SayHerName, Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie criticize how contemporary racial justice movements often focus on police killings of unarmed black men without recognizing the extent that women and girls are also victims of racial profiling, beatings, sexual assault, and murder by law enforcement. Citing the lack of available data on police killings and assaults of black women and the media’s representation of black men as the exclusive victims of such violence, they suggest that the solution to such an epistemic gap is twofold. First, it is necessary to commit to including women within existing frames surrounding racial profiling and “recognize what is right in front of us” by including slain and abused black women’s names – such as Aiyana Stanley-Jones and Mya Hall, a seven-year old girl killed in her sleep and a transgender black woman,

⁸⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm_term=.af6e76b6fa0e.

respectively – alongside the names of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice. Second, the frameworks that account for racist state violence must be expanded. They insist that black women and girls are vulnerable to violence as black women in particular. For example, black women who act as drug mules or whose homes are used as drug factories are uniquely targeted but the War on Drugs, mentally ill or abused women are uniquely vulnerable to undertrained policemen acting as first responders, and mothers and their children are uniquely vulnerable to punishment based on damaging stereotypes and myths that devalue black motherhood and are often subject to police intimidation when they demand justice for family members. Additionally, black women are also especially vulnerable to sexual assault or policing based on their sexuality. As they explain, “addressing Black women’s experience of police violence requires a broadening of the public conversation, informed by robust research, analysis, and advocacy... We need only answer the simple call to #SayHerName.”⁸⁹

In this context, it is also important to acknowledge the extent that gangsta rap in the 1990s helped to build our contemporary frameworks for understanding police violence. When the N.W.A. biopic *Straight Outta Compton* was released in 2015, commentators frequently noted the film’s relevance to the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Adrienne Green notes that “at a time when the #BlackLivesMatter movement and increased coverage of police killings is dominating the public discourse, *Straight Outta Compton* raises

⁸⁹ African American Policy Forum. Center for Intersectionality and Policy Studies, “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women,” Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie, (July 2015): 7.

questions about the responsibility of rap artists in bearing witness, as N.W.A. did, to the problems affecting their communities.”⁹⁰ A piece in *Complex* by Gabriel Alvarez compares the 1965 Watts riots and the 1992 L.A. riots with the spontaneous rioting that took place in Ferguson, Missouri after the fatal shooting of Mike Brown by officer Darren Wilson, and notes how the phrase “fuck the police!” has been adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement.⁹¹

Part of the renewed interest in gangsta rap in recent years certainly has to do with the genre’s documentation of the police abuses and other circumstances leading to the Rodney King riots in 1992. Ice Cube’s song “Who Got the Camera” is a good example of a song that demonstrates the resonance of gangsta rap from the 1990s with the present day. Included in his 1992 album *The Predator*, the song depicts the artist subjected to a Rodney King-esque beating after being misidentified by the police as the culprit in a robbery. Describing the crowd witnessing the abuse, Ice Cube ends the first two verses with the question “who got the camera?” Indeed, videos of police slayings and beatings of African Americans have become increasingly present on social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, and have helped frame the lack of police accountability. Media coverage of the Facebook Live video stream taken by Diamond Reynolds after her boyfriend, Philandro Castile, was fatally shot by Officer Jeronimo Yanez after

⁹⁰ Adrienne Green, “*Straight Outta Compton* and the Social Burdens of Hip-Hop,” August 14, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/08/straight-outta-compton-nwa/401279/>.

⁹¹ Gabriel Alvarez, “Men in Black: Why N.W.A.’s Message is Now More Relevant than Ever,” *Complex*, August 14, 2015, <http://www.complex.com/music/2015/08/men-in-black-straight-outta-compton-nwa>.

reaching for his wallet during a traffic stop in on July 6th 2016 allowed the public to follow the court case against Yanez in June 2017.⁹² Following his acquittal, previously unreleased dash cam footage from Yanez's vehicle that captured the exchange that led up to Castile's murder helped activists insist that justice was deferred on major media outlets. Videos of the killings of 12-year-old Tamir Rice and Mike Brown have entered the public consciousness and are now inextricably linked to the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Despite the lasting impact of the morality scare against gangsta rap, the ongoing conversation about the genre has also helped to build a framework to account for racialized state violence that we refer to in the present. While we are increasingly comfortable acknowledging how gangsta rap of the late 1980s and 1990s worked as a living document where rappers could levy critiques of the world as they knew it, we have not extended our scope to include the perspectives of women rappers. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the exclusion of women in our understanding of gangsta rap has also contributed to the exclusion of women from the dominant frameworks that we refer to when we think about contemporary white supremacy and state violence. Just as the #SayHerName campaign works to highlight instances of black women and girls who have faced police violence so as to both reaffirm and expand the Black Lives Matter critique,

⁹² An account of this video can be found in Alex Wagner's "To Live and Die on Facebook," *The Atlantic*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/to-live-and-die-on-facebook/490637/>.

highlighting the work of the women rappers will help to both reaffirm and expand the critique levied within gangsta rap.

An important project of hip hop feminism has been to highlight the music of women rappers who do not command the same media attention as their better-selling male counterparts, and are therefore cast as secondary players within mainstream narratives. Gwendolyn Pough, for example, places women rappers within a legacy of black women feminists who have resisted patriarchy and white supremacy by creating alternative communal spaces through the skillful deployment of oppositional language in writing, speeches, and music. Suggesting that black women of the hip hop generation “are the ones doing the meaningful work” of resisting white supremacy in the post-Black Power era, Pough examines how women rappers like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Monie Love, and others use their music as a space to “bring wreck” to patriarchy and male dominance within hip hop. Wreck, according to Pough, is exemplified in “moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary.”⁹³

In honing her analysis of women in rap on how their lyrics challenge dominant ideologies that silence black women both within rap and larger society, Pough engages with a black feminist critique that sees black women’s silence as a function of their position as black, as women, and as black women. According to black feminist Frances Beale, black women experience a “double jeopardy” insofar as they experience racism as black people, and are frequently scapegoated

⁹³ Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 75-76.

for the institutional oppression of black men. One of the effects of this is that women are easily left out of notions of revolutionary struggle, which she suggests compromises the possibility for revolutionary action to yield more just institutions. In this regard, rewriting the frameworks that define the relationship between men and women is a pre-requisite for productive political work.⁹⁴

In this framework, it is necessary to actively work to recognize black women's speech by acknowledging how readily they are ignored. According to Audre Lorde, silence is a state that is akin to death. She suggests that "the transformation of silence into language and action" is a means of initiating social transformation and begin to "bridge some of those differences" that separate women from each other, and women from men.⁹⁵ The "rhetoric of wreck" that Pough suggests women rappers deploy is an act that initiates such a transformation by 'wrecking' the barriers that keep black women silenced. The 'rhetoric of wreck' in this way relates to a black women's rhetorical tradition that black feminist bell hooks identifies as 'talking back.' According to hooks, a primary struggle for black women is not only moving from silence into speech, but also using speech to expose and rebut the structures of domination that render contrarian voices incoherent. As she puts it, 'talking back' resists the tendency for black women's voices to be "tuned out" or "become a kind of background music,

⁹⁴ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 109-122.

⁹⁵ Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 44.

audible but not acknowledged as significant speech.”⁹⁶ ‘Coming to voice’ through ‘talking back’ is thus a performative process in which moving from silence into speech is a means of turning oneself from object of discourse to oppositional speaking subject.

Hip hop feminism acknowledges that women have always been a part of hip hop as producers, MCs, and listeners. The task becomes to build frameworks that makes their participation in rap music coherent. However, it must also be acknowledged that while there has been much important work in the past twenty years committed to detailing the work that women rappers do, these rarely account for women in gangsta rap. For example, in Cheryl Keyes’s essay “Daughters of the Blues: Women, Race, and Class Representations in Rap Music,” she demonstrates how various women rappers “perceive rap as a site from which to contest, protest, and affirm working-class ideologies of black womanhood” by identifying a number of strategic archetypes that women rappers of the 90’s personas fall into such as ‘Queen Mother,’ ‘Fly Girl,’ ‘Sista with Attitude,’ and ‘The Lesbian.’⁹⁷ Yet, the only West Coast rappers she identifies are Boss, Yo-Yo, and Nefertiti, and these rappers are only given superficial acknowledgement. Nefertiti is simply included in a list of Queen Mothers, Boss’s description is pulled directly from the *Wall Street Journal* exposé on her that I problematized in the previous chapter, and Yo-Yo, who is given the most

⁹⁶ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Between the Lines Press, 1989), 6.

⁹⁷ Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

substantial treatment, is described as having transcended the pressures of gangsta rap by having “moved beyond the shadow of her mentor Ice Cube” by her 1996 album, *Total Control*, though the nature of this mentorship is not examined.⁹⁸

I believe that there are political consequences of continuing to ignore the women who contributed to gangsta rap. Accepting the absence of female voices gives credence to the polemics in which men’s unchecked hypermasculine posturing stands and, thus, poses an imminent threat in need of containment. At the same time that female gangsta rappers were either ignored or interpreted as victims of the genre, songs about female empowerment by “positive” women rappers who were mostly from the East Coast were often cited in order to distinguish ‘gangsta rap’ from ‘rap,’ paralleling the distinction being drawn between poor urban blacks and the African American community writ large. For example, in his testimony to the House of Representatives, Paris Eley, the Senior Vice President of Motown Records, agreed that gangsta rap threatened “to socialize our males with a mindset that violence perpetrated upon the female is acceptable” and referenced Queen Latifah’s song “U.N.I.T.Y.” as an example of rap music that “denies the power of the sexual epithet to define her as a person” and “delivers food for positive thought.”⁹⁹ Queen Latifah’s artistic manager Tammy Riley was also invited to speak at the House hearing, though she was careful to articulate a more nuanced position, stating that “parents should develop

⁹⁸ Ibid., 198.

⁹⁹ Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Music Lyrics and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 11 and May 5, 1994, 128-129.

realistic lines of communication with their children and shape their perception of reality and not let the media do their job or blame the entertainment industry for their shortcomings.”¹⁰⁰

In centering the hip hop feminist discourse on East Coast women rappers, these scholars risk employing a similar monolithic notion of ‘rap’ that they suggest women rappers worked within, replicating the logic of disavowal that allowed gangsta rap to be defined as an out-of-control genre made by misogynists without any regard for women. The truth, however, is that women rappers made up an important part of the Los Angeles rap community and helped establish the scene’s funky, vulgar, and often-aggressively confrontational contribution to rap. In this chapter, I will show that women were not only present in the scene, but that they played an important in developing the complex representational politics that distinguish gangsta rap from other forms of rap. As with Crenshaw’s intersectional #SayHerName campaign, the purpose is both to show how women work within traditional frameworks for dealing with gangsta rap and female rappers, as well as expand these frameworks.

While I problematized the discursive construction of ‘gangsta rap’ in the previous chapter, I still choose to use the term in this chapter because I believe that it captures the spirit of Los Angeles’s contribution to rap. A major reason why L.A. was a site of such marked political contestation was because of the presence of youth gangs. In her testimony to the House, for example, Yo-Yo

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 143.

distinguished West and East Coast rap by comparing life in L.A. with life in New York:

Being from Los Angeles and going to the East Coast, there is a difference. They are more culturally-motivated than the West Coast, I feel. I feel the West Coast are so involved with gangs, drugs, it is like they are locked in a cave. It is like they are shelled in. You know when you are in the neighborhood of gang bangers, or just in the black neighborhood. You know when you are in the hood, and you know when you are out of the hood... I think that West Coast rappers tend to be more hard-core... because reality of Los Angeles or the West Coast is so hard. We can't run from the problem that surrounds us.¹⁰¹

The 'hard-core' quality of gangsta rap is partially a literal reflection of the presence of street gangs in Los Angeles. The 'gangsta' part of gangsta rap also references the fantastical representational politics of the genre, where artists speak from the perspective of various unsavory archetypal personas, including gang-bangers. Robin D.G. Kelley argues that gangsta rap should be seen in this regard within a tradition that goes back to the blues and the black folklore and vernacular traditions of the late 19th century. He notes that blues, toasts, and baaadman tales, as well as gangsta rap, are all often violent and raunchy while also insistently engaging with questions of power. He explains that within this rhetorical trope, antihero archetypes like the baaadman and the trickster "embody a challenge to virtually *all* authority... [which] creates an imaginary upside-down world where the oppressed are the powerful, and it reveals to listeners the pleasures and price of reckless abandon."¹⁰²

In gangsta rap, female and male artists alike locate their political voice by carefully characterizing their personas and identifying themselves within a

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 51

¹⁰² Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 187.

constructed fantasy that is an impression of the real world. In discourse about gangsta rap, detractors often state their opposition over the music by merely describing their offense over these personas. In the previous chapter, I showed how the music of Lichelle “Bo\$\$” Laws was subjected to a profound misreading that obscured how her music provided commentary on the social distance between the black urban poor and the black middle class. In defending Bo\$\$ while testifying before Congress, President of Def Jam Records David Harleston insisted that the mischaracterization of Bo\$\$’s music was rooted in a misunderstanding of her persona:

If you listen to the entire album and get a full sense of what this persona is, you understand that this is a frustrated, angry, and frankly a little bit crazy person... she is very experienced sexually, she has been involved with drugs, the persona, now, not the individual, Lichelle. And really she paints a movie-like picture of the individual, the character, and the situations in which she finds herself... In my statement you recall I made reference to the inability of a number of listeners to accord hip-hop artists credit for the kinds of uses of metaphors and imagery and other techniques that in other literary and artistic contexts are presumed... When viewed in that context, the character, Boss, is very real.¹⁰³

It is necessary to read Bo\$\$’s persona in order to situate her pointed political critique. Even songs that appear apolitical are important to acknowledge in order to understand her political stakes. For example, while Bo\$\$’s single “I Don’t Give a Fuck” was the subject of much controversy, she uses the song to define and locate herself within a world she does not claim to understand. Her critics who took offense to the seemingly nihilistic utterance repeated eight times in its

¹⁰³ Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Music Lyrics and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 11 and May 5, 1994, 46.

overtly obscene hook, which is spit in short rhythmic bursts that combine into a hemiola pattern, that sounds like a carnivalesque rendering of a double-dutch rhyme or clapping game. The hook indeed seems to be offensive for the sake of being offensive:

I don't give a fuck, not a single fuck
Not a single solitary fuck
'Cuz I don't give a fuck, motherfucker!
I don't give a fuck, not a single fuck
Not a single solitary fuck
I don't give a fuck!

While clearly meant to shock and offend, it also becomes clear in the first verse that it is actually because her persona “doesn’t give a fuck” that she is compelled to speak down authority without fear. Opening with the statement that “I don’t give a fuck about none y’all,” this verse deploys an archetypal gangsta idiom to literally express hostility towards the listener while simultaneously defining what kind of perspective and experience she is offering. When she refers to her rapping as “taking two to ya head” with a sawed-off shotgun because she is “one crazed bitch” in the following three lines, she is both threatening the listener and promising to metaphorically blow their minds. In the rest of the verse, she places her persona in an imagined scenario where she escapes from jail and seeks revenge on the judge, who is “talking that same shit” and thus represents the acceptance of the (political, lyrical) status quo. Finally, she concludes the verse by explaining that such an act of speaking truth to power is “what got [her] locked up in the first place,” and insists that she will continue to do so because she is not afraid of the consequences:

I don't give a fuck about none of y'all!
Big balling ass Boss taking two to ya head
With a sawed-off shotgun, give it up 'cuz I'm one
Crazed bitch! Rolling, think gang full of lunatics!
Bailing, running through the mud
Escaped from the cell block
Searchin' for the god-damned judge
'Cuz it's hard to get revenge on a punk
Pop the trunk, grab the pump and pull the trigga, my nigga.
From the jump kept fucking up, talking that same shit
So I snuck up, and fucked up her game and shit!
Bitches that's down and we found 'em
The pump we caught 'em then clowned 'em
Lots of niggas stretched out from a murder case
I don't mind doing it again
The shit that got me locked up in the first place.
Forced to let the nine go buck!
I truly don't give a fuck!

Creating Bo\$\$ as a character who doesn't give a fuck, gives Lichelle Laws the person the ability to ask dangerous questions that otherwise are protected from scrutiny. But it would also be wrong to take her aggression too seriously, as she uses this song to make fun of herself within the album as well. In the Intro and Outro skits that take the form of a call from her mother and father, respectively, she uses a variation of the hook – “I don't give a fuck, not a single fuck, not a single solitary fuck. Yo what's up muthafuckas? I'm not even home so leave me a message and I'll get back with y'all” – as her answering machine message. This causes her parents to show loving annoyance, with her mother saying “Hi, Lichelle. Look, you should take that off your answering machine – it does not sound nice” and her father saying “Lichelle, what do you have on your telephone? ... You know better than that.”

In making fun of herself, Bo\$\$ is not undermining the integrity of her persona that 'doesn't give a fuck.' Rather, she is nodding towards the playful signifying

practice that is another central quality of gangsta rap's representational politics. Kelley notes that "not all descriptions of violence are simply metaphors. Exaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices" that "connote the playful use of language itself."¹⁰⁴ Suggesting that this playful quality counterbalances the genre's social realism, he writes that "we need to go back... to the age-old tradition of 'signifying' if we want to uncover the roots of the 'gangsta' aesthetic in hip hop."¹⁰⁵

Eithne Quinn defines signifying as "encoded and highly rhetorical black vernacular speech or, in short, clever wordplay" and cites linguist Geneva Smitherman to state that the practice encompasses:

exaggerated language (unusual words); mimicry; proverbial statement and aphoristic phrasing; punning and plays on words; spontaneity and improvisation; image making and metaphor; braggadocio; indirection (circumlocution, suggestiveness); and tonal semantics.¹⁰⁶

Quinn notes that the linguistic practice of signifying is closely tied to the personas that populate the genre by connecting the figure of the 'trickster-pimp' with other characters that have historically populated toasts and ballads. Derived from the story of the 'Signifying Monkey,' which is an orally-preserved toast about a monkey who manipulates a lion into fighting a physically-superior elephant by

¹⁰⁴ Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," 190.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 187.

¹⁰⁶ Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 94, quoted in Quinn, *Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang*, 119.

convincing him that the elephant has crassly insulted his family, Quinn points to the exaltation of the ethos of “using [one’s] wiles and cleverness to accomplish what he [or she] cannot accomplish with brawn” within gangsta rap.¹⁰⁷

In his book on the history of African American music, Samuel Floyd affirms the importance of the ‘Signifying Monkey’ toast on urban black musical forms, suggesting that “for urban blacks, the strategy of this toast became a means of coping symbolically with white resistance to racial progress, and with the hostilities then prevalent within the African-American community itself.” Rather than retreating “to the solace of the Negro spiritual,” he argues, “they *signified*, using the toast of the Signifying Monkey as their model.” In African American music, he explains:

Musical figures Signify by commenting on other musical figures, on themselves, on performances of other music, on other performances of the same piece, and on completely new works of music. Moreover, genres Signify on other genres... funk on soul; rap on funk; and so on. Call-Response, the master trope, the musical trope of tropes, implies the presence within it of Signifyin(g) figures (calls) and Signifyin(g) revisions (responses, in various guises) that can be one of the other, depending on the context.¹⁰⁸

Gangsta rap, of course, is no exception to this. It is a genre that not only signifies upon white supremacist power structures, but also other black musical predecessors. Its lyrics are not only grounded in a street reality but often seem like they could have come from a 1970s blaxploitation film, with a sampling practice that relies heavily up the sensational afro-futurist P-funk tradition – a style that

¹⁰⁷ Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang*, 119.

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95.

often accompanied such films. As a rap form, it references the increasingly-prestigious style of New York-based hip hop, but also the raunchier and affective post-disco beats and rhymes of the Southern strip club circuit. Indeed, as its critics readily observe, gangsta rap's signifying practice also uses minstrelsy as a reference point, and there is a general self-awareness among those in gangsta rap that their trope-ridden performances of affected blackness are primarily funded by a white-middle class market. However, because gangsta rap resembles these other styles does not make it merely a 'version' of blaxploitation, minstrelsy, disco, funk, or even New York-centric rap. Rather, its distinct identity is based largely upon how gangsta rap signifies upon its predecessors in the context of the post-industrial and neoliberalizing site of Central Los Angeles.

Quinn acknowledges that signifying is part of gangsta rap's sexual politics in that "verbal mastery is equated with sexual dominance" and thus defines the relationship between pimp and hoe personas.¹⁰⁹ While this accounts for some of the more misogynistic lyrics uttered by male gangsta rappers, it also frames how women often respond to disrespect from men. In Menajahwa's "Kuz Itz Like Dat," for example, the two women of the duo and a husky-voiced man become increasingly hostile towards one another when they show indifference at his attempts at seducing them. In this funky track, the duo's lyrical wit stands for the strength embodied by their personas, and there is never any question whether they are in control of the situation. In the third verse, for example, after the man says "I know you ain't shit but another muthatfuckin' punk-ass bitch," Spice responds

¹⁰⁹ Quinn, *Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang*, 118.

affirmatively by saying that she is indeed a “crazy bitch... about to clown that silly ass” and passes the mic to Royal T, who continues:

A bitch never gave a fuck to rippin’ a nigga’s guts
Thought ya game was deep, now ya hangin’ from your own nuts
Or should I say from the chin? Ya fucked-up goatee was a trip.
But on the real, I watched that ass drip from the lip
So hold ya balls, nigga, and dig a six-foot ditch
‘Cause ya know you can’t fade this bitch

When the man replies with the expositional phrase “let me check that yeast-infested ass,” the girls interrupt him with a series of retorts that deftly turn the statement away from them, then towards his mother, then right back onto the man, saying “No no no. I know you didn’t call me yeasty. What’s yeasty is your moms. Yeasty had your punk ass.”

This crass exchange is in many ways typical of gangsta rap’s particular type of signifying practice, and shows how the genre could afford women the opportunity to ‘talk back’ to misogyny by playing with it. Menajahtwa are not rebuking gangsta rap misogyny so much as they are rebuking misogyny through gangsta rap. Indeed, “Kuz Itz Like Dat” also signifies on the heavy-handedness of East Coast rap in playing with the title of male duo Run-D.M.C.’s 1983 single “It’s Like That.” Whereas the former use the refrain “it’s like that, and that’s the way it is” to express disillusionment and resignation over social ills such as war and debt, and concludes with a call for listeners to pursue education, “stop playing start praying,” and “take the bus or the train, drive to school or church,” Menajahtwa use the same line to tell the man to get over himself and stop trying because they will never be interested in him.

Represented by the independent gangsta rap label Ruthless Records, Menajahtwa were first introduced in 1992, appearing on Eazy-E's obscene holiday single, "Merry Muthafuckin' Xmas" where they are hailed by Santa Claus's signature laugh of "ho ho ho," after which he asks them to "sit on [his] face." Their personas are insatiably hypersexual man-eaters who take 'hysteria' to its logical extreme, demonstrating the extent that women were indeed able to match, and in many cases outdo, the vulgarity deployed by men in gangsta rap. As was typical with other Ruthless Records acts, their record *Cha-licious* is both aggressively 'hard-core' and perversely cartoonish. It is easy to see the influence of P-funk science fiction on their personas, which are described in quasi-mythic terms in a campy voice-over introducing the first track, titled "Breaka." Spoken over the sounds of police sirens, a male voice intones:

Every so often some rough, hardcore, don't-give-a-fuck-type bitches come along. And it must be that season. 'Cause these bitches ain't no motherfuckin' joke. Bred and raised in the fucked-up streets of Compton, we deliver to the world: Menajahtwa.

While they, like Bo\$\$, "don't give a fuck," they are more confrontational and desire conflict for conflict's sake. In one of Royal T's verses on this track, for example, she introduces herself by mimicking gunshots and calling herself a "crazy bitch that's always strapped" who's "ready to break every bone in your back." While this aggressive current runs through the album, they also fashion themselves as literal embodiments of the stereotype of sexually "delicious" women. In the album's title track, "Cha-licious," for example, each verse describes men performing fellatio on them. While this song is obviously overtly

sexual, Spice and Royal T shield themselves from male objectification with their extreme vulgarity, deep and raspy voices, and virtuosic machine gun-like flow. They eschew the traditional form of collaborative rap tracks where artists alternate verses, instead seamlessly trading lines, adding spontaneous rejoinders, and occasionally speaking the same line in unison, appearing to be of a single mind and creating a sonic effect of swarming bullets. Here, their refusal to allow the men to penetrate them with anything but their tongues is a source of their power that they use to reject male dominance. They are entirely dismissive of the sexual desires of men, and quick to emasculate them. In fact, their personas are quite literally phallic, as they make clear in the very first couplet where they state that “any nigga with a tongue/Can use it to get a bitch sprung,” to which they carefully reaffirm importance of consent by adding a layered sample of a male voice clarifying “but only if you want it.” This quality is embodied to humorous effect throughout the album, and is exemplified by song titles like “Give Tha Azz 2 No 1,” as well as in the concluding track, “Dumb Azz Bitch,” a skit where we listen to a man trying to call them for an entire minute whispering phrases such as “come on bitch, answer the phone.” While the man initially seems to stand for a generic male ‘creep,’ duo use him to signify upon us, the presumably male listener. When they finally answer, they mock the listener for wasting his time, saying “y’all muthafuckas still listening to this? You’s a stupid muthafucka!”

Menajahntwa’s personas confront what Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” of black womanhood, which are objectifying stereotypes of black womanhood that become sites where authority exercises power over black

women.¹¹⁰ As she explains, archetypal images portraying black women such as Mammies, Jezebels, and Sapphires have been used since the slave era to define black women's subordinate position in relation to men and also to articulate an inability for them to achieve the "cardinal virtues" of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" that white women could hope to gain social recognition for achieving. Collins demonstrates that these images had evolved by the 1990s into the competing archetypes of the irresponsible and endlessly consumptive 'welfare queen' and the middle-class, hard-working 'black lady' who has nevertheless benefitted unfairly from affirmative action efforts. When taken together, she argues, they "constitute class-specific versions of a patriarchy thesis whose fundamental purpose is to discredit Black women's full exercise of citizenship rights," leaving them "between a rock and a hard place."

While Bo\$\$ plays with the boundaries between these boundaries as an ex-black lady-turned-hustler who uses gangsta rap to define herself as a speaking subject instead of a black woman vying for recognition by a patriarchal state, Menajahwa evade this binary and instead position themselves within a third contemporary controlling image that Collins refers to as the "hoochie mama," or the "ghetto hoochie." The 'ghetto hoochie,' she explains, is an evolution of the Jezebel and is one commonly found in rap music. It imagines black women's sexuality as excessive and "whose main purpose is to provide [men] sexual favors," standing as the deviant 'other' of normative white heterosexuality.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

These images work to regulate social difference by rendering black women as multiply-opposed to dominant values of whiteness and masculinity, for example. In framing difference within a set of binary oppositions, she argues, it allows for “domination based on difference” to become the underpinning for a system of thought built on “binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectification, and social hierarchy” that determines social worth based on “relationship of superiority and inferiority, hierarchal bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression.”¹¹² In other words, because images like the ‘ghetto hoochie’ define a population of black women as hypersexual, endlessly reproductive, and irrational, it puts real black women in danger of sexual assault as well as renders them objects targeted by repressive policies meant to control their behavior and reproduction.

Menajahntwa indeed embody this stereotype, but they do so in a way that defies objectification. They are sexually-desiring, but they are indifferent to male pleasure. At one point in “Cha-licious,” for example, they pun on the “can’t stop, won’t stop” hip hop trope in an interlude where Spice is moaning and telling a man “don’t stop” accompanied by cartoonish slurping sounds. When the slurping stops, she angrily commands him to “put [his] head back down.” Rather than existing as sexual objects to men’s desire, they explore the psychosexual dimensions of the ‘hoochie’ trope and enter the sublime territory of the abject.

As opposed to the object, Julie Kristeva defines the abject as the “jettisoned object” that repulses the subject instead of being defined by it.¹¹³ While the abject

¹¹² Ibid., 71.

exists outside of the subject, it “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules.” Uncoupled from the symbolic order in which difference is managed, the abject poses an existential threat to the subject and embodied in oppositional figures such as “the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior... a hatred that smiles, a passion that used the body for barter instead of inflaming it.”¹¹⁴ By abjecting it, Menajahtwa turn the controlling image of the ‘hoochie’ into a defiant image. In the third verse, for example, they describe an abject sexual scenario not to sexualize themselves, but to demonstrate their cunning and the danger they pose to others:

Step one, put his tongue to the wound
Two, sucks my cracker, then boom
Three, make a nigga think he’s getting something
Step four, he’s licking on the motherfucking one
Lick me up and lick me down on Mr. Pearl’s tongue
Don’t get yourself sprung
Fly my shit out
Playing that role like I’m down to fuck
Flicking your dick, my rin-tin-tin
The cha’s in your face, I’m cummin’ off the chin
The nigga’s on his knees, but he never face me
Juicy got another motherfucking cha crazy
Thinking you stinking in, you’ll be lucky just to cry
Nigga full of shit, cause I ain’t worth 69
Life is too short, well so is your dick
There won’t be any fucking, so nigga just lick

Through performing such a grotesque abjection of the ‘hoochie,’ Menajahtwa are simulatenouesly recognizable-as and distinct-from this controlling image. This

¹¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

points towards the political potential of gangsta rap's signifying practice – by playing with the sound and style artifacts of black musical traditions as well as the ideological and image artifacts of the white heteropatriarchal imaginary, gangsta rappers locate themselves by contesting the meanings of the structures that make their music and personas instantly recognizable.

Both Bo\$\$ and Menajahtwa deploy dangerously confrontational personas that reject the legitimacy of social authority by existing at the border between sanity and insanity, but use different strategies to engage with a different set of black musical and social tropes. Along this vein, another “dangerous” and “crazy” female rapper is NiNi X, a member of the Fruit Town Piru set of the Bloods street gang who also went by Bloody Mary in other recording projects. After achieving some recognition for her work in the album project *Bangin' on Wax*, a remarkable collaborative project between members of the Bloods and Crips street gangs produced after the Los Angeles Riots where they rhetorically attacked each other “on wax” to signify their commitment to easing deadly force on the streets, NiNi X fashioned herself as a deadly force who also had a posse of men at her disposal ready to “regulate” those who insulted her in her 1994 solo album *She's Dangerous*, released on the independent label Dangerous Records which specialized in representing rappers who were active members of L.A. street gangs. As with Menajahtwa's *Chal-licious*, *She's Dangerous* opens with an unidentified voice that introduces her persona. In this case, a female voice heralds her by singing in a soulful R&B style:

NiNi X is not the one, fool you betta watch your back.

Your ass will be fucked, and that's a motherfuckin' fact.
If you wanna contest, she'll put your ass to rest.
Stretched with the X, the girl is dangerous.

More than with Menajahtwa or Bo\$\$, one of the signifying strands within this album is the vulgarization of the R&B style. On the one hand, this simply points at the already-close connection between the two genres, as it was common for major gangsta rap labels to also represent selected R&B artists.¹¹⁵ At the same time, in vulgarizing R&B, NiNi X and her collaborators taunt gangsta rap's critics who regarded the genre as a more positive representation of the black musical tradition. This is best demonstrated in the aptly-titled track "Jokin' Around." A duet between NiNi X and the Joker (also known as Big Joker) the song initially appears to stage a conflict based on the many assumed differences between the male singer representing the Grape Street Crips and the female rapper representing the Blood-affiliated Fruit Town Piru Gang. In the first verse, the two exchange short lines where they insult the opposite sex and issue threats of violence. While it initially seems that they are insulting one another, it becomes increasingly clear by the end of the verse that they are actually signifying, or 'joking around,' with language that emphasizes sexual antagonisms and that they

¹¹⁵ The fairly traditional R&B singer Michel'le is perhaps the most prominent example of this. Partly due to her close personal relationship with Dr. Dre, her first album, *Michel'le* (1989) was one of Ruthless Records first releases, and her second album *Hung Jury* (1998) would be released on Death Row. Incidentally, Dre's relationship with Michel'le was an abusive one, and was the subject of much discourse at the time and recently, due to her exclusion from the *Straight Outta Compton* biopic. See, for example, Natalie Weiner's "Dr. Dre's Ex Michel'le Speaks on Being the 'Quiet Girlfriend Who Got Beat Up'," *Billboard*, August 8, 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6664131/dr-dre-michelle-straight-outta-compton-abuse>.

are really talking about teaming up to take down both of their enemies. The key to interpreting this verse as well as the recognition that it will be misinterpreted is actually stated by NiNi X in a brief spoken statement that precedes the first verse: “NiNi X in the house beside the Joker... fadin’ all white shit. You don’t hear me though.” Indeed, the statement ‘you don’t hear me though’ comes back in the first verse, and speaks to the inability of critics to understand the signifying language that both NiNi X and the Joker deploy through the verse:

Verse 1:

Joker (all sung):

Fuck these punk-ass bitches tryna trip on the Brother J
I don’t really wanna hear what the fuck they’ve gotta say.

NiNi X (all rapped):

But yo some niggas they trip on me to fuck a roller extra habit
It’s me they want, but it ain’t that easy to stab it
Pencil dicks don’t satisfy me, what he just said.

Joker:

My dick is long and it’s strong and it’s wicked in bed.

NiNi X:

Well is that right? Well maybe baby we should do this kinda quickly
I need some dick, some dick, so diggity-dick-dick in me.

Joker:

Bitches run they mouth, I’ma put my foot up their motherfuckin’ ass
They can put their mouth on the dick, do it quick, stupid bitch ya betta
make it last.

NiNi X:

And go downtown. That’s what you do when you’re with me
Believe me, not everyone is able to dick me
Don’t get confused when the X starts to slaughter
Fuck devils lookin’ at me, you won’t be rapin’ this daughter.

Joker:

You don’t want no trouble (Yet). Bitch you know I’ll beat you down.
To the, to the, motherfuckin’ ground.

NiNi X:
Nigga your ass is trippin'

Joker:
'Cause it's something I can't fuckin' control
If you trip on me, I guarantee, I'll leave you on the fuckin' floor.

NiNi X:
Damn now while you're beatin' niggas down let 'em know about the X.

Joker:
You lose if you choose to put it to the test.

NiNi X:
That's right, that's right, you don't hear me though, you don't hear me
though, you better listen
And ask somebody next time you plan your dissin'
It don't matter, bitch, if you trip.

Joker:
What will you do?

NiNi X:
Put the bullets in the clip.

Joker:
Fuck, fuck you.

NiNi X:
Damn the motherfucker gone, the bitch tried to play games.

Joker:
'Cause ain't nothin' changed, nothin' changed.

NiNi X:
Ain't a fuckin' thing changed that shit's right, let's get down
NiNi X and Joker just jokin' around.

If there was any ambiguity left unresolved by the end of the verse, the chorus makes their stakes clear. Because they are unable to see that they were the actual intended targets of the staged battle of the sexes, critics are in fact unable to

recognize the power that the two have when they turn their many differences into a source of power:

Chorus (2x):

Joker:

You can't fade the X.

NiNi X:

And you can't fade the Joker.

Together:

Step up bitch, you just missed, and now we gotta smoke ya.

As “Jokin’ Around” shows, NiNi X does not hide her gender or sexuality in order to make herself into “one of the boys.” Rather, she makes herself their leader more than capable of taking enemies down herself as well as in collaboration with other powerful individuals. Significantly, she calls her crew “NiNi and the 4,” which in some ways resembles a gang set. However, her collaborators include members of both the Bloods and the Crips, showing the possibility for gangsta rap to bridge differences between men and women as well as the two infamously antagonistic gangs. This is not achieved by pedantically advocating for peace, but in using the representational tools available to her within the gangsta tradition to demonstrate the political and affective power gained when beefs are resolved and anger redirected towards coalition-building.

In *She’s Dangerous*, NiNi X shows a willingness to cross color lines for the sake of collaboration, such that gangsta rap itself becomes an alternative to the streets as a space worth defending. This sometimes means expressing affinity with artists who are unaffiliated with a set and are criticized for capitalizing upon the

violence that real gang members face by the genre's opponents. For example, in the song "Crush Luke," she inserts herself in the middle of a feud between Miami-based Luke and Dr. Dre by responding to the former's song "Cowards in Compton" where he at one point emasculates Dre by signifying on the line "ain't nuthin' but a G-thang baby" by changing it to "take off that g-string baby" in response to being dissed on the song "Fuck With Dre Day." The hook of "Crush Luke" takes the form of call-and-response with NiNi X asking "Is Luke a Man?" and her crew responding "Fuck no, he wish he could be." She states in the first verse, "ain't no Cowards in Compton, fuck you and your hood" and asks "what smoked-out bitch told you you looked good?" before threatening to blow his car up if he ever tried to visit the city. In "Gangsta Props," she proclaims that she and close collaborator, male Crip member Tweedy Bird Loc, are in the house, and in the second verse states that she "cannot understand why you're listening to that MC Lyte crap." She proceeds by gives "gangsta props" to an eclectic list of gangsta rappers that cross racial, gender, and gang set lines, including the American Samoan Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E., Crip affiliates Snoop Doggy Dogg and C-Bo, fellow Blood member J. Stank, and even Bo\$\$, who had no gang affiliation.

While I am not comfortable calling any of the rappers I have described thus far 'feminist rappers,' it is still necessary to interrogate their absence from the hip hop feminist discourse. Bo\$\$, Menajhtwa, and NiNi X are female rappers who do not come close to fitting within any of the archetypes of women rappers laid out by Cheryl Keyes. Neither 'fly girl' nor 'Queen Mother,' their strategic representations occupy an entirely different taxonomy that has yet to be

meaningfully accounted for. While it is indeed a genre filled with negative tropes of women by men, the representational politics of gangsta rap nevertheless gave women an opportunity for gendered performances that are yet unacknowledged as distinct. While all three deploy the “rhetoric of wreck” by “talking back” to patriarchal authority, they do so in a way that few, if any, East Coast female rappers at the time were able. Bo\$\$, as I argued in the previous chapter, “wrecks” heteropatriarchal ideology by eschewing almost all sexual signifiers and by turning to gangsta rap as a means of questioning the purpose of valuing the suburban middle-class life that she grew up in so highly. Menajahtwa, in contrast, give “wreck” a visceral psychosexual dimension such that they embody the insatiable desire for pleasure implied by sexist stereotypes of black women to such extremes that they are able to demand respect from their listeners and men in the genre. NiNi X uses “wreck” in her tracks to attempt to fashion gangsta rap as a discursive site where street violence can be transmuted into playful – and empowering – rhetoric.

Building a Gangsta Rap Feminist Framework: Bo\$\$, Menajahtwa, and NiNi X

I suggest that in order to integrate women’s representational strategies into an account of gangsta rap’s sexual politics, it is important to reevaluate two core qualities associated with gangsta rap. First, I suggest that while gangsta rap should not be seen as legally obscene, its sexually explicit violent rhetoric needs to be acknowledged as a core part of its distinct political value. Feminist scholars risk failing to distinguish between *obscene* and *objectifying* representations of women.

While the two often overlap, artist can resist objectification while still deploying sexually-explicit language. To some extent, making rappers like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Salt-n-Pepa, and Monie Love who rarely venture into such vulgar territory represent the category of ‘female rappers’ in the early 1990s reproduces ideologies where women’s worth is dependent on their virtue and family values. The truth is that gangsta rap is intentionally filled with rhetoric that would make the typical parent blush, and this is indeed part of gangsta rap’s core identity.

Gangsta rap’s obscenity is indeed central within the genre’s oppositional sexual politics in which women performed *as women*, not despite the fact that they were women. As Angela Davis emphasizes in her 1988 book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, black musical forms have historically offered women a unique outlet to openly express desire and sexuality decoupled from the confines of the ideology of romantic love. In the case of the blues, which emerged shortly after the abolition of slavery and replaced the spiritual as the dominant form of black popular music, Davis insists that within the blues, “sexuality was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation.”¹¹⁶ As the sexually-explicit lyrics of artists like Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey were a means of asserting worth and selfhood outside of the sexual exploitation of chattel slavery, women in gangsta rap often use sexually-vulgar lyrics to express their desires and disgusts from subject positions as post-industrial “surplus

¹¹⁶ Angela Davis, *Blue Legacies and Black Feminist: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1989), 4.

people.” Women gangsta rappers show an awareness of how the control of black women’s behavior, sexuality, and reproduction is tied to the suppression of their entire communities. Obscenity stands in open defiance of the notion that “black progress” is predicated upon black women’s willingness to discipline themselves and their families.

We risk replicating the criminalizing logic of disavowal by enforcing a respectability threshold that excludes female gangsta rappers from hip hop feminism on account of their vulgarity, as well as by dismissing the legitimacy of the gangsta rap genre because of its vulgarity. Lisa Maria Cacho argues that “to say that some groups form the foundation for law is to say that law is dependent upon the *permanence* of certain groups’ criminalization. These permanently criminalized people are... *ineligible for personhood* – as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them.”¹¹⁷ In this regard, the double-displacement of female gangsta rappers from hip hop feminism and as gangsta rappers whose genre is displaced from mainstream rap discourse stands for the failure to grant post-industrial urban black women personhood.

Secondly, I would like to take a closer look at the sexual implications of gangsta rap as a signifying practice. As an analytic, signifying has been used to show how artists ironically adopt gangbanging personas and depict scenes of street violence as a means of critiquing violence, but scholars have been hesitant to extend this critique to account for how sexual vulgarity can also be a means of

¹¹⁷ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 6.

critiquing institutional sexism. During the gangsta rap House hearings, Robin D.G. Kelley testified that “many, not all, rap artists draw on this [signifying] tradition because they too find the mythic baaadman compelling *not only* for its sexism but for its resistance to police, to racism, to government, and other embodiments of authority” (emphasis mine).¹¹⁸ In this reading, signifying strategies are not only implicitly reserved for men, but Kelley suggests that men who adopt signifying personas do so with a double-consciousness that is simultaneously critical of institutional racism and indifferent to institutional sexism. As I have shown, however, women were indeed participants within gangsta rap’s larger signifying project, and they often did so in collaboration with men. When it is understood that even male artists who were reviled for their outrageous misogyny regularly brought these personas into collaborations with women who would sometimes rhetorically “wreck” them with their consent, it becomes evident that there is a sexual component of signifying within gangsta rap that has been left critically unexamined.

As Kelley’s statement shows, even gangsta rap’s staunch advocates have precluded the possibility that gangsta rap’s misogyny can be part of its critical politics. In an interview with filmmaker Byron Hurt who directed the critical documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Michael Eric Dyson suggests that “if hip hop has a theology, it’s pretty consistent with the biblical justification of male misbehavior by blaming the seducing female. Now that’s not to deny that

¹¹⁸ Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Music Lyrics and Commerce*, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., February 11 and May 5, 1994, 144.

there's female complicity. We have to ask the hard question of why certain women conform to the vicious images of female sexual identity promoted in misogynistic masculinity." When Hurt asks "why aren't more men confronting the sexism in hip hop?" Dyson replies "to put it crudely, it's not in their best interest to do so."¹¹⁹ In this reading, hip hop's misogyny and violence stands for a problem that rappers systemically and uncritically reproduce, with women accused of complicity when they take on sexualized roles and personas. While it is certainly true that hip hop is a space where misogynistic viewpoints can be expressed uncritically and men who are left out of the mainstream economy can capitalize on toxic masculinity in ways that are otherwise unavailable to them, it is also a space where artists can signify on these ideas as a means of redefining the relationships between men and women, men and men, women and women, and more increasingly these days between complexly gendered non-binary bodies. While it may or may not be in men's best financial interest to confront sexism in hip hop, an intersectional critique of power suggests that it is indeed in their political interest to do so. Dyson therefore insists upon maintaining a stark demarcation between politically-oppositional and sexually-explicit rap.

In order to account for how signifying practices can extend to gangsta rap's sexual politics, it is necessary to reevaluate it through an intersectional framework that accommodates the often-political nature of gangsta rap's obscenity. In order to do this, I will venture outside of West Coast gangsta rap to take a close look at the obscenity hearings over 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty As*

¹¹⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), 110-111.

They Wanna Be that took place in the late 1980s. Alongside the attempted suppression of N.W.A.'s song "Fuck Tha Police" by law enforcement through less official means that occurred at the same time, Christopher Schneider suggests that these hearings were one of two catalysts that led to the development of gangsta rap's "censorship frame," noting that "the former was criticized for its extreme violent content and the latter for its sexually explicit content," representing the two main qualities of gangsta rap criticism in the early 1990s.¹²⁰

Setting the Stage: The 2 Live Crew Obscenity Hearings

In the Congressional hearings on gangsta rap, C. Delores Tucker followed up her infamous claim that gangsta rap should not qualify for First Amendment protection because "it is obscene, it is obscene, it is obscene" by making reference to the precedence set by the federal courts in declaring Miami rap group 2 Live Crew's album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* legally obscene in 1990. This was an important moment in rap music history, and was one of the first times that the then-relatively niche genre was the subject of a national debate about its role in society. At the time of this controversy, hip hop was generally used to describe music played in urban dance clubs. And though it came with the baggage of being associated with African American urban dwellers, liberals were generally comfortable thinking of the genre as a symbol of black perseverance in spite of continued civil rights struggles. Most Americans were not privy to hip hop's more

¹²⁰ Christopher Schneider, "Culture, Rap Music, 'Bitch,' and the Development of the Censorship Frame," *American Behavioral Scientist* XX no. X (2010): 13.

vulgar existence in sites like strip clubs in the South or in house parties at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and were easily shocked by 2 Live Crew's Miami bass album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, which contained shocking song titles, including "Me So Horny," "Put Her in the Buck," "The Fuck Shop," and "My Seven Bizzos." The album became popular in the South Florida club circuit and at fraternity parties at the University of Miami, and went on to top the Billboard rap charts in 1989.

The push to label 2 Live Crew's album obscene was initiated at the behest of conservative lawyer Jack Thompson, who sent a letter to state prosecutor Janet Reno and Governor Bob Martinez on January 1st 1989 asking them to investigate the album and make it unsaleable. Although Reno refused to pursue action, Martinez called for a probe of the group's record label. After a Lee County judge ruled that there was "probable cause to believe" that the album was obscene, Thompson sent letters to every governor and selected police officials in the country which contained lyrics from the album, leading to judges in other counties around the country to issue similar rulings.¹²¹ Also at Thompson's behest, Broward County sheriff Nick Navarro threatened local record shop owners with arrest if they continued carrying the album leading to most record stores taking the album off the shelf. After 2 Live Crew filed a civil suit in U.S. District Court on March 16 to reverse this designation by lower courts, Judge Jose Gonzalez ruled that the album indeed met the criteria for obscenity, leading to the

¹²¹ "The Anatomy of a Crusade," *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1990, http://articles.latimes.com/1990-06-18/entertainment/ca-92_1_live-crew.

arrests of two members of the group for continuing to perform songs from the album as well as several record store owners who continued to sell the record.

The 2 Live Crew censorship movement, like the gangsta rap morality scare that it would help initiate, was multifaceted and operated along a number of different lines. In this case, censorship was achieved by Thompson urging politicians, law enforcement, and several courts to act to suppress the album and artists independently of one another. It also involved a good amount of showmanship. In interviews, Jack Thompson frequently described his vigilante legal activism as a battle between good and evil, telling Chuck Philips of the *L.A. Times* that “to me, Luther Campbell isn’t Luke Skywalker... he’s the Joker. He’s peddling obscenity to children and that is why I have to play Batman here – to assist, to cajole and to sometimes embarrass government into doing its job.”¹²² Thompson, who would eventually be disbarred by the Florida Bar for professional misconduct in 2007, would spend the following decades extending his crusade against obscenity in the media, with subsequent anti-rap activism focused mostly on Los Angeles gangsta rap. In 1991, Thompson attempted a similar, but less successful, censorship campaign against N.W.A.’s album *Efil4Zaggin*. In the months following the 1992 L.A. riots, he was hired by a far-right organization founded by Oliver North called the Freedom Group to threaten Time Warner with prosecution on grounds of sedition for carrying Ice-T’s heavy metal song “Cop Killer.” While the threat certainly stood on shaky legal grounds, he was ultimately successful in getting Time Warner to both drop Ice-T’s album and to issue a ban

¹²² Chuck Philips, “The ‘Batman’ Who Took on Rap,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1990, http://articles.latimes.com/1990-06-18/entertainment/ca-87_1_jack-thompson.

on lyrics that threatened police with death. In all of these cases, Thompson attempted to initiate legal suppression through creating a morality panic in the media that would put pressure on politicians and record labels to act on behalf of his personal crusade.

Incidentally, there is reason to believe that Thompson was motivated by hubris rather than moral conviction. Campbell alleged at the time that Thompson targeted the group after Anquette, a women rap group led by Anquette Allen and backed by Keia Red and Ray Ray, carried by Campbell's record label, released a single lauding state prosecutor Janet Reno. Thompson has a long history of antagonizing the progressive State Attorney, who had become something of an icon in black and brown Miami for having led the unsuccessful prosecution of five white policemen who were accused of beating a black insurance salesman to death in 1980 and subsequently supporting the angry participants in the ensuing Miami riots, convincing many who were initially demanding her resignation to see her as a political ally.¹²³ Thompson had attempted to challenge Reno for State Prosecutor in 1988 after she ignored his demand to prosecute openly-homosexual shock jock Neil Rogers the previous year. His campaign against Reno was tinged with equal measures of theatrics and homophobia, at one point presenting Reno with a letter asking her to publically indicate whether she was a homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. When she responded by putting her hand on his shoulder and saying "I'm only interested in virile men. That's why I'm not

¹²³ Jay Weaver, "How Janet Reno Handled and Bounced Back from the Biggest Cases in Her Life" *Miami Herald*, November, 2016, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article113010078.html>.

interested in you,” Thompson filed a police report accusing her of battery for touching him.¹²⁴ It is certainly possible that Thompson was offended by Anquette’s song, which celebrates Reno’s aggressive crackdown of men who don’t pay child support. In fact “Janet Reno” can be read as a response to the type of immaturity represented on 2 Live Crew’s album, by claiming Reno as an ally who had the power legally retaliate against misogynistic behavior. The second verse, for example, seems like a reminder that the misogynistic and hyper-masculine behavior described by 2 Live Crew in tracks like “Me So Horny” and “Put Her in the Buck” has legal consequences:

You’re out in your ‘vert, dicking it down
You start to get babbling when Reno comes around
You start changing your looks, your clothes and your car
You’re not a mama’s boy, you’re a projects star
It’s time to pay your dues, you ain’t got no pull
You can’t boss around like the boys on the Ave
And slowly but surely I’m getting all that you have
From your bad-ass suits to your Revlon cologne
Your diamond rings, gold rope and everything you own
Will get taken away and then you be sad to the max
And I’ll even get your income tax

While I could not find direct evidence that Thompson knew about this track, it is probably safe to say that he was at least not motivated by a desire to protect black women from the reality of sexual violence, and instead approached the suppression of 2 Live Crew more territorially, as a small part of his role in a broader eschatological drama taking place in the realm of popular culture. For

¹²⁴ Andy Chalk, “Legally Insane: A History of Jack Thompson’s Antics,” *The Escapist*, July 6, 2007, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/columns/the-needles/792-Legally-Insane-A-History-of-Jack-Thompson-s-Antics>.

example, in his interview with Chuck Philips, he explains that his “job is not to win these things, but as it says in Ephesians, simply to take a stand” and states his conviction that “the world is headed toward apocalyptic destruction as set forth in Scripture. As a Christian I’m bound to that belief, but in the meantime... we are required to say [there is] such a thing as right and wrong and that the laws ought to be enforced because God has inspired those laws.” By his account, the suppression of 2 Live Crew’s music was a battle over principles rather than people, even though his crusade involved advocating for the imprisonment of group members and did nothing to advocate on behalf of those who he claimed were victimized by the music.

It is perhaps too easy to dismiss the obscenity trials against 2 Live Crew, however, as the work of a single galvanized crusader for Christ and not take both the racial and sexual politics of their censorship seriously, as it is on these abstract cultural and moral grounds that much of the ensuing debates over gangsta rap would take place. The 2 Live Crew obscenity hearings placed hip hop at the center of the culture wars of the 1980s and 90s where members of the New Right, white suburban liberals, and representatives of newly-visible black middle class found common ground in their shared opposition to offensive rap music, eventually directing their focus on L.A.-based gangsta rap. It also gave members of the post-Civil Rights academically-oriented black intelligentsia an opportunity to test the real-world political implications of their theories developed in the 80s, and arguably initiated the interdisciplinary field of hip hop and rap studies itself.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most prominent academic defenses of 2 Live Crew was that of Henry Louis Gates Jr., who wrote in his op-ed published in the *New York Times* on June 19, 1990 that 2 Live Crew's music should be understood as a "heavy handed parody" that "turn[s] the stereotypes of black and white American culture on their heads."¹²⁵ Criticizing the obscenity trials as being racially-motivated, he argues in this piece that rap be understood as a contemporary form of the African American vernacular signifying tradition, in which obscene language and imagery are deployed so as to satirize stereotypes by putting them in bawdy and carnivalesque contexts that are too exaggerated to take seriously.

As Gates argues in his book of literary criticism released the previous year, signifying is at the core of the African American literary and artistic tradition as it exists in relation to white/Eurocentric society.¹²⁶ Gates makes this point by incorporating it into the critical tradition of French post-structuralism that dominated academic literary circles in the 1980s. Referencing, and ultimately supplanting, Ferdinand Saussure's theory of linguistic signification-as-meaning-making, Gates argues that African American signifying is a disruptive meta-discourse that replaces, and thus enacts a political intervention upon, the language of the white middle class and their racialized fantasies that subordinates symbolic blackness as well as black bodies. Signifying on Jacques Derrida's theory of

¹²⁵ Henry Louis Gates, "2 Live Crew, Decoded," *New York Times*, June 19, 1990.

¹²⁶ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

différance and theory of socio-linguistic distinction,¹²⁷ Gates argues that African American signifying necessarily denotes black social and linguistic difference from whiteness, and by playing with language, reinvents and vulgarizes English, thus pushing back against a white-supremacist social structure by intervening on the primacy of white meaning-making. This allows for an analysis of how African American literature can initiate an anti-hegemonic process of self-definition. In his words:

To revise the received sign... literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning. What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cypher?¹²⁸

As is a quality of much political theory derived from post-structuralism, Gates's theory of signifying as a black linguistic strategy conceptualizes resistance in primarily symbolic and anti-hegemonic terms. In his defense of 2 Live Crew, Gates tests the advocacy potential of his theory by arguing that 2 Live Crew's lyrics are defensible because they resist the very white hegemonic forces that motivated the obscenity trials in the first place. In referring to the political work that 2 Live Crew 'actually' performs with their music, Gates, like his theory, centers on the racial element of the music's politics, suggesting that while the

¹²⁷ Jacques Derrida introduced the concept of *différance* in 1968 to account for how symbolic objects are more so deferred and displaced than differentiated or distinguished within language. Whereas 'difference' implies a blunt negation of the relationship between two objects, Derrida argues that this process of negation is itself a structured absence and that '*différance*' accounts for how differences themselves interact. See Derrida's essay "*Différance*," originally published in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* LXII, no. 3 (July-September, 1968), 73-101.

¹²⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 47.

sexist implications are indeed troubling, “their sexism is so flagrant... that it almost cancels itself out in a hyperbolic war between the sexes.” In this regard, Gates’s defense is at least somewhat self-interested, and although he is rightly cynical about the actual intent behind silencing sexist rap music, he ultimately follows Thompson’s lead by making the question of the relationship between misogynistic lyrics and actual violence against black women essentially irrelevant.

These limitations elicited a response from Crenshaw, who agrees with Gates’s assessment that 2 Live Crew’s lyrics have artistic and political value and thus fall under protected speech. She also agrees that the charges against them were racially-motivated, but is critical of his dismissal of misogynistic wordplay as a form of postmodern resistance to white social mores.¹²⁹ She is dissatisfied with how his defense allows for a reading of misogynistic wordplay as a form of pro-black politics, explaining that even if descriptions of black women engaging in hyperbolic heterosexual sex acts are seen as a critique on racist stereotypes about black male sexuality, black women are still subordinated and “called to serve these gargantuan penises and thus are in the position of absorbing the impact” of the anti-racist wordplay. Underlying Gates’ defense, she argues, is the message that “Black women are expected to be the vehicles for notions of [Black] ‘liberation’ that function to preserve Black female subordination.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew” in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 246-263.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 261

Like Gates, Crenshaw's approach to 2 Live Crew was informed by her own recent scholarly interventions, especially her notion of intersectionality, which she introduced in 1989 as a tool that allowed her to analyze the multidimensionality of black women's experience and to intervene on the tendency for black women to be "theoretically erased" by problematizing the tendency to think of subordination as occurring along a single axis of identity.¹³¹ By thinking of discrimination in terms of being either simply racially- or gender-motivated, or basing activism around the monolithic frameworks of the "black experience" or the "women's experience," Crenshaw argues that the distinct forms of discrimination experienced by black women are made illegible. As with Gates' theory of Signifying, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is both a philosophical and political intervention. But unlike Gates, who thinks of politics as a symbolic hegemonic exchange of power enacted through language and discourse, Crenshaw is a legal scholar who premises her political critique on black women's experience within institutions of power, including the legal system, the workplace, and the domestic sphere. Crenshaw describes how black women's vulnerability to sexual violence is unaccounted for in traditional (white) feminist theory as well as traditional Black Liberation theory. According to her, black women experience violence as both black people AND as women, not either as black people OR as women.

¹³¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.

The 2 Live Crew case represented an important real-world problematic for Crenshaw, which she claims instigated her to expand her definition of intersectionality and to begin to formulate a Black feminist account of gender violence.¹³² While intersectionality is traditionally thought of as a method of accounting for how power is enacted along multiple lines of identity, Crenshaw expands her definition of intersectionality in her response to the 2 Live Crew case, explaining that it is “a transitional concept that links current concepts with their political consequences, and real world politics with postmodern thought” and that challenges the assumption that race and gender are essentially separate concepts. She explains that intersectionality’s function is to frame the question: “How does the fact that women of color are simultaneously situated within at least two groups that are subjected to broad societal subordination bear upon problems traditionally viewed as monocausal – that is, gender discrimination or race discrimination?” and identifies three related but theoretically distinct aspects of subordination that intersectionality must account for, including *structural intersectionality*, *political intersectionality*, and *representational intersectionality*.¹³³

Structural intersectionality, she explains, refers to how systems of subordination overlap in compounding ways, such that black women are often simultaneously vulnerable to poverty, illiteracy, child care responsibilities, and lack of job skills, pointing to the need for advocacy premised on a single issue to

¹³² Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny,” 253

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 249.

be prepared to account for related-but-distinct conditions of victimhood.¹³⁴

Political intersectionality, on the other hand, emphasizes how non-intersectional antiracist and feminist interventions run the risk of legitimizing the dynamics of subordinations that are not accounted for, and leave women of color without a framework to even conceptualize the violence that occurs in their lives. Finally, *representational intersectionality* accounts for discourse and the circulation of images that create specific narratives and stereotypes about women of color, often resulting in convergences between sexual stereotypes of blackness and of femininity.

Crenshaw sees all three of these subordinations working together to ultimately erase black women from the entire meta-discourse of the 2 Live Crew controversy. While Thompson's attack on the group was based on the representational politics of its lyrics, she notes that the impact of censorship extends beyond the politics of representation. Criticism of the group that support legal censor, she notes, have tended to explicitly compare the group's infraction to actual black male criminals. Defenses of the group, conversely, have generally problematized the racial politics of the trial while ignoring the sexual dimension of the group's racialized self-representations. Rather, an appropriate black feminist response must be based on recognizing the exclusion of black women from nearly all sides of the discourse, and be based on identifying the structural,

¹³⁴ For example, Crenshaw provides the example of how rape crisis hotlines in impoverished neighborhoods need to be equipped to deal with drug abuse, unemployment, hunger, poverty, distrust of law enforcement, etc., because of the structural connection between sexual abuse and these other conditions.

political, and representational dimensions of the trial and ensuing discourse. She explains that, unlike Gates, she did not “bust out laughing” while listening to 2 Live Crew’s music, and was instead reminded of the reality of actual embodied forms of sexual violence against black women performed by black men. At the same time, she is also concerned with how opposition to 2 Live Crew that connects their misogyny to black male criminality risks reproducing the historical pattern of justifying legal (i.e. imprisonment) or extra-legal (i.e. lynching) intervention as a means of disciplining black communities due to what is seen as otherwise uncontrollable black male sexuality.

In attempting to construct a black feminist response to 2 Live Crew, Crenshaw identifies an important intersectional problematic, namely that “if the rhetoric of antisexism provided an occasion for racism, so too, the rhetoric of antiracism provided an occasion for defending the misogyny of Black male rappers.”¹³⁵ In other words, “nothing about the anti-2 Live Crew movement is about Black women’s lives,” and “the defense primarily functions to protect the cultural and political prerogative of male rappers to be as misogynistic as they want to be.”¹³⁶ A black feminist response in this case must integrate the political and representational consequences of misogynistic lyrics by accounting for the structural dimensions of the systems of domination of black women, including their compounding vulnerabilities to rape, domestic violence, and welfare dependency. Ultimately, however, Crenshaw remains ambivalent about the

¹³⁵ Ibid., 259.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 262.

specifics about the case, and leaves her theorization of rap's misogyny aside in her future work, choosing instead to work on expanding her intersectional theory so as to account for the intersectional dimensions of sexual violence.

While Gates presents a compelling case that rap should be read as a signifying practice, I agree with Crenshaw that an intersectional account of rap's sexual and racial politics is needed. Interestingly, both Gates and Crenshaw call for more attention to be paid to women rappers and their responses to 2 Live Crew's music while failing to incorporate women rappers' perspectives in their critiques. Indeed, the absence of peer women rappers in essentially all discourse about the 2 Live Crew, and in the subsequent discourse about gangsta rap obscenity, points to the need for intersectional intervention so as to make black women's representations within gangsta rap legible. In order to integrate Gates's theory of rap as a signifying practice with Crenshaw's intersectional theory, I would like to think about the absence of women gangsta rappers in discussions of gangsta rap's sexual politics as a critical exclusion that should be problematized.

As it has been described by sociologists, signifying is a phenomenon that takes the form of spontaneous play. Before Gates described signifying within literature, sociologists wrote about signifying as a game that was mostly practiced within, rather than between, racial groups. Roger Abrahams in fact expresses concern with how the signifying game of The Dozens takes an "in-caste pattern" that "confines aggression within Negro society" instead of towards white society, due to the punishment they were likely to receive for displaying direct hostility

towards whites.”¹³⁷ Yet, while played within racial groups, The Dozens were also often played between men and women, and sexual obscenity is intrinsic to the game. In one of the first sociological examinations of the practice published in 1939, for example, John Dollard describes the game as a “dialectic of insults” and notes how informants agreed that “the game may be played between girls and girls, and girls and boys.”¹³⁸ While Gates shows how literary practices rooted in this oral tradition can be an outlet for African Americans to mock themselves and each other as a means of covertly mocking white hegemonic norms, he does relatively little to account for these intra-racial or sexual dimensions of signifying practices as they are translated into literary texts as signifying techniques.

One of the consequences of ignoring women rappers within rap’s censorship frame is also a consequence of ignoring the extent that women are an important part of the signifying tradition as translated within rap. Namely, it becomes difficult to see how women rappers – and thus their critical voices - are in fact particularly vulnerable to suppression when labels are threatened with injunction. Within the censorship frame, rap is thought of as a form of cultural production that turns the moral failings of contemporary society into profit, and has a vested interest in maintaining this behavior. Black male rappers are thought of as adolescents whose perspectives represent the criminal and violent mentality of the typical urban black youth, and labels are imagined to simply exploit and

¹³⁷ Roger Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle...: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 20-21.

¹³⁸ John Dollard, “The Dozens: the Dialectic of Insult,” *American Imago*, no. 1 (November 1939): 4-20.

profit from these social ills, and thus are the primary targets of injunction. As a result, all acts that are carried by a label are suppressed.

Women rappers and singers who were represented (or would come to be represented) on Luther “Cool Luke” Campbell’s record label Luke Records, including rap trio Anquette, R&B singers Angee Griffin and Trellini, and Marcella “PreC.I.S.E. MC” Precise, contest the characterization of women by 2 Live Crew through their own self-characterizations in their music. Rap’s censorship frame makes it difficult to recognize the extent that rap’s gender politics are defined through contestation within and between labels, regional styles, and groups. In fact, the most violent and vulgar perspectives are made more powerful by isolating them from the more contested territory they were originally part of.

As a means of analyzing closed texts, Gates’s signifying theory is limited insofar as it similarly constrains its analysis to the lyrics within a song, rather than seeing how a song’s contested meaning occurs dialogically, across albums and between competing voices within albums. For example, Gates claims that 2 Live Crew’s lyrics should be understood as satire because the group “is engaged in sexual carnivalesque” implying that sexually violent lyrics are defensible because they parody white language and the white imagination, but does not extend his analysis to demonstrate how their humorous-yet-misogynistic rendering of black women as sexually-available objects is rebuked and signified upon by women rappers who work to redefine the role of women within rap.

By referencing Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnavalesque," whom he also cites in *The Signifying Monkey* for his concept of the "double-voiced word,"¹³⁹ Gates performs what British cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls a "profound misread[ing]" of Bakhtin that was characteristic of cultural theory in the 1980s and 90s. While Gates references Bakhtin in order to explain how words and phrases can retain a multiplicity of meanings and thus can become grounds for decolonization by African Americans who imbue discourse with oppositional semantic content, Hall explains that Bakhtin has been "profoundly misread" by theorists who think of the carnivalesque as "simply and upturning of two things that are locked in their oppositional frameworks."¹⁴⁰ Rather, he insists that popular culture and the 'carnavalesque' is crosscut with Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic, which is a multi-vocal discourse that works, like intersectionality, along multiple axes of social difference. While he does not directly cite Gates, he seems to take issue with the kind of analysis Gates deployed in defense of 2 Live Crew, explaining that it is not enough to think about popular culture texts as battlegrounds between symbolic whiteness and blackness because they are themselves productive of new forms of blackness in which other forms of social antagonisms are maintained:

To put it crudely, certain ways in which black men continue to live out their counter-identities as black masculinities and replay those fantasies of

¹³⁹ Gates writes in *The Signifying Monkey* that "the process of semantic appropriation in evidence in the relations of Signification to signification has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black's purposes 'by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has – and retains – its own orientation'" (50).

¹⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, "What is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1993): 113.

black masculinities in the theaters of popular culture are, when viewed from along other axes of difference, the very masculine identities that are oppressive to women, that claim visibility for their hardness only at the expense of the vulnerability of black women and the feminization of gay black men. The way in which a transgressive politics in one domain is constantly sutured and stabilized by reactionary of unexamined politics in another is only to be explained by this continuous dislocation of one identity by another, one structure by another. **Dominant ethnicities are always underpinned by a particular sexual economy, a particular figured masculinity, a particular class identity.**”¹⁴¹

Both Hall and Crenshaw are right to warn against reductive and essentialist analysis of the relationship between race and culture, and to pay attention to the sexual economy that structures cultural transmission. Yet, as an oral and literary form that frequently situates rhetorical battles on the metaphorical ‘street’, Gates’ theory of rap as a signifying practice still holds weight. By thinking of signifying dialogically – as a playful dialogue that is meaningful because of the responses it elicits as much as the conditions it responds to – rather than as carnivalesque parody, it becomes possible to understand the importance of women rappers as participants in the conversation. Tricia Rose, too, advocates for a dialogic feminist analysis of women rappers that focuses on how black women rappers are constantly negotiating social boundaries and defining not only themselves, but their relationship to one another, male rappers, other musicians, fans, critics, and other listeners.¹⁴² She criticizes the tendency for feminist scholars to place women rappers into marginal positions in relation to rap discourse, generally thinking of women rappers as feminist or

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴² Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994), 148.

proto-feminist voices who oppose the sexism that rap would fully embrace without them.

Rose warns that this does not give an account of the complexities and contradictions in black women's roles in rap, and observes that the majority of women rappers refused to directly comment on the 2 Live Crew controversy to the media, "not necessarily because they did not find the lyrics offensive, but because they were acutely aware of the dominant discursive context within which their responses would be reproduced."¹⁴³ However, if women rappers were hesitant to release public statements disavowing the group for their misogyny, many openly retaliated against the images of women depicted in 2 Live Crew in their own music while also demonstrating affinity for the group as fellow rappers. Anquette, for example, fashioned herself and her group as female counterparts to 2 Live Crew, with their first single "Throw the P" (1986) being a parody of 2 Live Crew's already-parodic dance hit "Throw the D." Yet, this affinity did not stop the group from resisting the reductive terms 2 Live Crew often used to describe women. In the title track of their first album, *Respect* (1988), Anquette raps about how "Fellas try real hard to degrade the ladies/Saying we're not with it, but this is the 80s," and suggests that her existence as a hard-hitting and finessed rapper proves that women are not as weak as many men assume, ending her second voice with a warning to "Think twice before you step outta check/Lady Anne is here, and I demand respect."

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Yet, Anquette sees misogyny from male rappers as only one of the many sources of disrespect, and opens the album with a spoken introduction thanking the listener and suggesting that it would be the ultimate sign of disrespect if the album did not receive the recognition it deserves. The album is not titled *Little Bit of Respect*, she explains, because it deserves “a lot of respect... I must get top billing... this time we’re coming out of the box strong... I can’t stand it. I’m taking no mess.” In other parts of the album, such as in “Throw the P” and “Ghetto Style,” Anquette shows affinity towards the raunchier side of rap, making it clear that they are not trying to simply challenge rap’s misogyny, but to prove that women and their critical voices belong and should be listened to alongside male rappers. 2 Live Crew and their misogynistic parodies of black women in this context become the territory that Anquette can define themselves as fully-realized women rappers who are more than capable of challenging 2 Live Crew’s misogyny, but seem more concerned with redefining rap as a genre alongside their male counterparts. Other women rappers represented by Luke Records deploy different representational strategies, with all of them demonstrating artistic control of their own images.

In contrast to the criticism that rap is an inherently violent and misogynistic genre that enacts violence on women, many women rappers express optimism in their music that rap can be a medium where recognition and an oppositional voice are earned through developing their technique, which gives them the ability to reconcile sexual difference without fully disavowing men for their regressive beliefs. In PreC.I.S.E. MC’s “Shall I Go On” from her album *PreC.I.S.E.-ly Done*

(1992), for example, she identifies herself as someone who likes to “take the time out for women’s lib ‘cause that is what [she is] all about.” Elsewhere in the song, and as a central theme of the record, she locates her power as a woman in her lyrical abilities, rapping in the third verse that she’s “got a way with words/to be heard, maybe a pronoun, allow me to do you with a verb,” and invites critics to challenge her on the mic at their own peril. This self-definition as a feminist does not undermine her identity as a black person, as elsewhere she shows a deep affinity for black men who are victims of institutionalized racism. In “For the Brothers,” she invokes the power of black men and women banding together to challenge the racism of the criminal justice system and police, ending each verse with a request to “pray for brothers.” Rather than focusing on the problem of sexism from black men, she connects the court system to the slave trade, where “we were bought by the whites and taught to fear,” and criticizes drug violence committed “to the little man for the middle man” when “the white man give a damn only for the Klan.” Identifying a sexual politics of the criminal justice system, she describes a situation where a judge convicts a boy for a crime he didn’t commit because of his existing criminal record, and asks the listener to consider the mothers who lose their sons to police murder or false accusations. In this track, she is not only concerned with a criminal justice system that targets black men, but on the impact that this has on the relationship between black men and women. In the final verse, she advocates for black children to recognize their power by banding together to fight racism and rejecting the legitimacy of the courts, but certainly not through supporting the racist prosecution of males.

Rose's call for a dialogic analysis of how women rappers simultaneously address multiple audiences centers notions of relationality within the sexual politics of rap, as opposed to through isolated readings of songs deemed either problematic or liberatory. This is useful because it shows how readings of rap music's sexual politics that extract women rappers from the analysis necessarily are acts of misreading and invasive redefinition of a cultural field. Even if critics rhetorically express support for women, these readings disempower women rappers by making their responses illegible, and give more power to violent lyrics by dis-locating them from the more critical, productive dialogue they originally existed within, making their violent perspectives appear uncontested and in need of outside intervention.

Because of the extent that this process of *interpretation-through-dislocation* is an act of power, I believe that Rose does not go far enough by limiting her analysis of rap's dialogic sexual politics to dialogues occurring within rap music as a discourse and between artists and fans. In order to provide an intersectional account of women in gangsta rap, it would be necessary to extend the dialogues outside of the realm of representational politics, and examine how these dialogues are themselves dialogues that engage structural forms of power. An intersectional intervention on the sexual politics of gangsta rap (and 'obscene' rap in general) should emphasize the extent that male and female rappers not only respond to one another and to their listeners, but work together to respond to the broader suppressive politics and structural inequalities enacted upon black women, black men, and the relationships between them.

The censorship trials over 2 Live Crew's music were 'about' much more than the content of 2 Live Crew's music, but were also an attempt by Jack Thompson and others to set the terms which the public would come to define rap music in the years to come. The concept of 'censorship' in this dialogic context not only suppresses but, consequently, highlights the most problematic music of the genre by focusing the public's attention on it and obscuring other acts deemed irrelevant. In the case of 2 Live Crew, and subsequently in gangsta rap, the censorship frame actually results in increased attention to the most objectionable aspects of the genre, creating an economy where these qualities become marketable, while producing mass ignorance about the work already being done within the discursive community.

I have devoted so much space to problematizing the 2 Live Crew case because it was truly a foundational moment in hip hop and cultural studies, making rap music a subject of a continuing national debate and setting the theoretical terms employed by much of the subsequent hip hop and rap scholarship. Gates' theory of rap as a signifying practice was particularly influential for gangsta rap scholars, who similarly attached the controversy-ridden subgenre to African American vernacular traditions such as The Dozens. I suggest that an analysis of the sexual dimensions of gangsta rap's representational politics needs to take into account Kimberlé Crenshaw's call for an intersectional analysis of rap that takes the exclusion of black women rappers seriously, as well as Stuart Hall and Tricia Rose's call for a dialogic reading of rap's existence as a form of black popular culture. In this regard, I am responding to the dis-location of women rappers by

re-orienting Gates' theory of signifying away from an analysis of the carnivalesque textuality within certain songs toward an analysis of how gangsta rap embodies the sexual carnivalesque as a whole where sexist representations are only the beginning of a richer dialogic exchange.

The Politics of “Livin’ In A Hoe House”: The Case of H.W.A.

To do this, I would like to look at how H.W.A.'s 1990 album *Livin' in a Hoe House*, which was released on the independent Drive-By Records and produced while the 2 Live Crew obscenity hearings were underway, show an equal concern for the implications of rap censorship as they do on the misogyny of groups like 2 Live Crew and N.W.A. I suggest that this album is significant within gangsta rap history because the representational and rhetorical strategies the group deployed in the album proved influential on the genre's development. While they were not the first female rap group associated with the formative gangsta rap scene and N.W.A.,¹⁴⁴ they were among the first to repurpose N.W.A.'s vulgar rhetorical style and use gangsta rap's representational politics to signify upon the genre, setting the stage for subsequent artists like Bo\$\$, Menajahtwa, and NiNi X. In this album, they work to separate the abject misogyny out of gangsta rap by embracing the genre's representations of sexual obscenity and violent encounters.

¹⁴⁴ That distinction goes to J.J. Fadd, a duo consisting of Juana Burns (MC J.B.) and Dania Burks (Baby D) whose album *Supersonic* was the first record released on Ruthless Records and was used to fund N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*. However, their music differs from the gangsta rap style I've detailed thus far. Closer to the rock rap style of Run D.M.C., their beats are generally produced by drum machines and songs with funk samples are exceptions rather than the rule. Their flow, likewise, is chant-like and often recited in a way that resembles a clapping or double-dutch rhyme.

In this regard, they respond to those wishing to censor misogynistic rap by offering a third way – supporting those working from within the genre instead of suppressing it from the outside.

At first glance, this is an odd album to use to facilitate an intersectional feminist intervention of the genre because of the trio's apparent complicity in the sexual objectification of black women. Whereas I distinguished between sexual objectification and sexual vulgarity earlier, H.W.A. are easily rendered as sex objects through the male gaze. Indeed, the three members of the group consistently embraced a campy hypersexual persona in the material used to promote the group and the album. The album cover alone is enough to elicit raised eyebrows, as it shows Jazz, the group's DJ, and Diva, the group's choreographer, each grabbing one of rapper Baby Girl's butt cheeks as she stands with her back facing the camera and looking towards a tacky mansion that is implied to be the "hoe house" the girls live within (Figure 3). Yet, the campy humor the group employs in the marketing surrounding the album makes it clear that this rendering of themselves as playful "hoes" is an ironic and strategic representation, even if it's not entirely rejected. In one moment during a promotional interview shot at a pool, for example, the group members are asked to define themselves in a word, and they respond with words like "hoeish," "fetish" and "edible." Yet within this same interview, they also make it clear that they "not selling sex," but "sexy," and Baby Girl explains the conceit behind the signifier,

stating “Hoez With Attitude, basically the ‘hoez’ part is business women, women making money at whatever they’re selling. We’re selling records.”¹⁴⁵

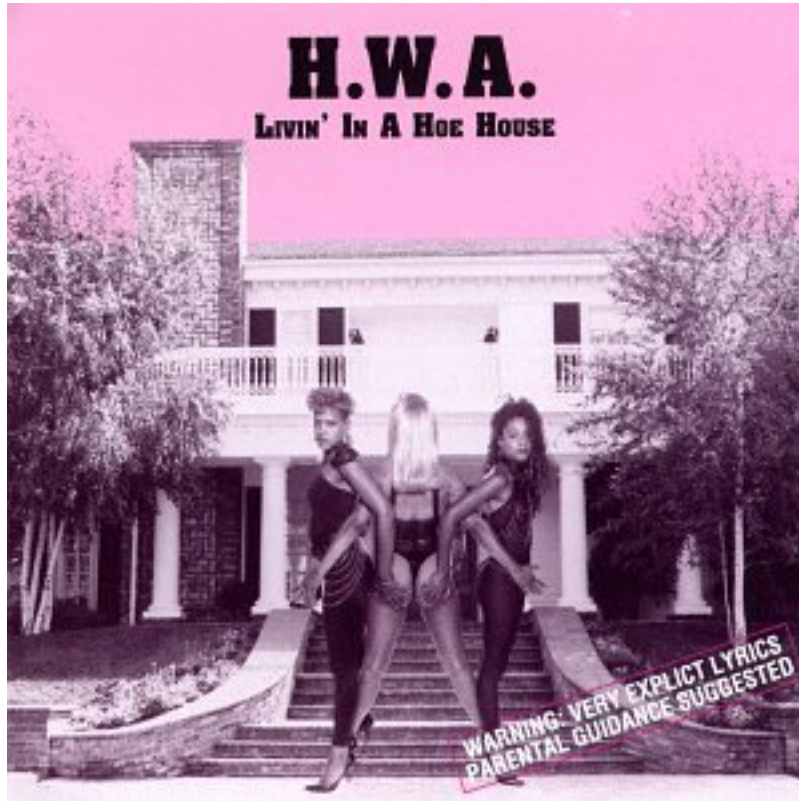


Figure 3 – Album Cover of H.W.A.’s *Livin’ In a Hoe House*

As a double-voiced signifying persona, the ‘hoe’ in this context is sexually accommodating on the surface but more fundamentally driven by her desire for power. The album is structured in a way that expresses this quality. Its 13 tracks are loosely divided into two groupings, with songs emphasizing the sexual quality of the ‘hoez’ located on the first half and songs emphasizing the dangerous and power-hungry side on the second half. An exception to this is the opening track,

¹⁴⁵ This is from a YouTube video, and I could not verify the origin of this interview. “H.W.A. Poolside Interview,” YouTube Video, Posted August 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW8eTC7PP9E>.

“To Live Or Die,” a violent diss track directed at Tarrie B., a white female rapper who was associated with N.W.A. and represented by Ruthless Records. As is often the case with intro tracks on gangsta rap albums, H.W.A. define themselves and establish the distinctive qualities of their personas on this track. Apparently taking offense at the sterility and irrelevance of Tairrie B.’s persona, a beautiful-but-deadly Italian mafiosa as depicted in her album *The Power of a Woman*, H.W.A. put her through the ringer for “riding the coat tail of the rapper Eazy-E” and mock her with the statement that “a hoe is on the beat so you won’t get very far.” In the extremely violent second verse, Baby Girl oscillates between explicit descriptions of torture and boasts about her superior rap skills:

I’m a motherfucker, I’ll put you through a test
You’re another sucker I had to lay to rest
Blood sweat and tears running down your face
I ain’t even pull a trigger now I got a murder case
I’ll drop your ass right down to your knees
You’re begging like a punk, baby girl please
...
I’m wasting my time, ‘cause it ain’t no fight
I’m a fuck you up when we touch the mic
My rap’s so strong, like an armored tank
Step back bitch, ‘cause you’re about to get ganked
H.W.A. is in the place
Kicking funky rhymes all in your face

While they do not drop their hard personas in the third verse, Baby Girl suggests that part of their strength comes from their superior ability to avoid censorship because of the pleasure they provide with their music when describing the aftermath of the lyrical assassination:

Your no-rapping ass was bound to fail
Now my motherfucking ass might wind up in jail
I went to court and copped my plea

I had to murder, she was a whack MC
The judge liked me and gave me a try
'Cause he liked my hit: "To Live Or Die"

As this track makes clear, H.W.A. are able to provide pleasure with their sexual representations, rhyming abilities, and virtuosic flow, but this is merely a means to an ends. After this initial unveiling, they put on their 'edible' signifiers in the following five tracks. These are still critical representations, however, and are often used as a means of coyly signifying on rap censorship in singles like "Funk Me," a dance number that literally "dances" around the issue. In the first verse, Baby Girl parodies hip hop dance singles where rappers recite dance moves, instead telling the listener to sit down and listen to a description of sex acts thinly-veiled as dance moves:

All y'all that's full of fear
Pull up a chair, relax your ear
H.W.A. is in the place
Freaks of the week like to funk me in the face
We do it real nasty when we're on the floor
Come on baby, funk me some more
Funk me in the front and funk me in the back
Now you're doing it, I like it like that
The dance is hot and a sheer delight
Don't worry about the steps, 'cause you're gonna get it right
With our big old butts and tiny little waists
I can't say those words, I might get a case
It takes a lot of rehearsing 'cause we can't do no cursing
We can say it much better when we use four letters
Take the N out of funk, and add a C
It's a new dance now called the "Funk Me"

In reworking the dance floor into a representation of the discursive field that their music is interpreted within, "Funk Me" goads censors with an otherwise typical dance track. They directly develop this critique of rap censorship in other tracks

on the first half of the album such as “1-900-BITCHES,” where the girls imagine themselves working in a pay-per-minute phone sex line. Like their real-life phone girl counterparts, they spin a fantasy scenario for the implicitly male listener in the first verse:

Picture this: the house is empty,
You’re looking at the phone, so motherfucking tempting
Then you see us on the TV, so you copy the number
Real fine hoes make your mind start to wander

After they describe ‘you’ calling, however, they begin to berate the listener once they answer the phone:

The phone is ringing, your heart is beating fast
You know I’m talking shit on your monkey ass
1-900-248-2437
You dialed it again, that makes it eleven
Times you called, yeah, that’s a bitch
Call it again, ‘cause you’re making me rich

As the track progresses, the trio fashion themselves as vulgar sirens, whose powers of (musical) seduction ensnare listeners who are embarrassed to admit the pleasure they get by listening to their music. By the third verse, this includes powerful political figures, including President George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush, who are sitting at home bored “knowing in their minds they got a big problem/they want to call up the hoes to help them solve it,” Manuel Antonio Noriega Moreno, who “want[s] to call the hoes, but no collect calls” in prison, and even Nelson Mandela, who knows that they “got it going on” all the way in Africa. By including names of a diverse cast of the political elite, including representatives of American neoconservatives, South American dictators who profit from drug trafficking, and ideologically-driven Black Nationalists, the

“hoez” use the symbol of a phone sex line as a metaphor for the relationship between poor urban blacks and the elite who hypocritically exploit while demonizing them (though they show more of an affinity towards Mandela). With the final line directed at these aforementioned callers, “motherfucking hoes, you know we’re too strong,” H.W.A. show that they use their personas to explore the possibility for the socially disenfranchised to be strong in the face of exploitation.

In some cases, evading rap censors means working with men who ‘pimp’ their music. In the track “Livin’ in a Hoe House,” for example, they describe their recording studio as a ‘hoe house’ where their executive producer, Sugar Daddy T., is “pimping fine bitches selling plenty CDs.” While acknowledging the unequal relationship between them, they nevertheless fashion their relationship as a collaborative one that allows them the opportunity to capitalize on their skills such that the fact that “hoes like us keep your dick aroused” guarantees a stream of profit and protection. When the ‘hoe house’ is raided by ‘the Feds’ in a scenario reminiscent of studio raids advocated for by rap critics like Jack Thompson as well as L.A.P.D. raids on suspected crack houses and prostitution dens that were common in L.A. at the time, they defend themselves by standing with their male producers against Federal suppression.

In the second half of the album, however, H.W.A. shed their hypersexual patina and assert their dominance over other rappers and direct their critical attention towards the offensive misogynistic clowning of N.W.A. In “Gangstrology,” Baby Girl is no longer a ‘hoe’ but “the Gangstress” and her group is now the “Uzi Brigade.” In the first verse, she expresses indignation at

those who previously failed to take her and her group seriously by denying them the pleasure they seek:

I'm the Gangstress
So motherfucker do you think you can spank this?
Right for me
Because you might be a sucker
Like Dre likes bitches that are nice, T
Right T?
I'm not the one who was a tight little has-been
Now I got your ass in my scope again
I'm gonna smoke you, watch the bullets stroke you
Your body is cold, but I'm still in motion
With my Uzi Brigade, throwing hand grenades
Like a hoe on a stroll, I got to get paid
It ain't pussy that I'm selling, so fuck your yelling
H.W.A. pockets keep swelling
With the kick of the funky drum,
You want my monkey, son?
You can't get none
'Cause I'm the Gangstress

In the second and third verse, Baby Girl hones in on Eazy-E, who she says is “like a fairy on the microphone” and warns “all y’all in N.W.A.” that she will be “taking [their] ass out the hard way,” promising that “one by one, you all going to drop.” By the end, she mocks Eazy-E’s song “Ruthless Villain” and promises nothing short of a bloodbath:

It's getting close to the end, can you hear the thunder?
N.W.A. going six feet under
I ain't got no remorse 'cause I'm hard as a rock
'Ruthless Villain'? Suck my cock!
'Cause I'm the gangstress

H.W.A. seems to take particular offense at N.W.A.’s infamously sexist track “A Bitch Iz a Bitch,” in which Ice Cube distinguishes between ‘respectable females’

and those “with a disease of character and attitude” whom the group signifies upon by calling them “funky, dirty, money-hungry, scandalous, stuck-up,” and “hair-piece-contact-wearing.” H.W.A. parody this song in “A Trick is a Treat,” which similarly denigrates “tricks” by describing them as men who think of hustling as a means of owning women. In the first verse, for example, Baby Girl rebukes a man who promises her Gucci clothing after asking him “because you’re selling drugs, do you think that make you bigger?” In the third verse, she berates a man for sending her a rose, and defines a trick:

Meaning of trick is easy to define
Nigga paying cash to get the pussy of mine
...
Smoking one who take the pussy and run
So don’t ever let a nigga talk that shit
‘Cause nine times out of ten, he ain’t nothing but a trick

While the entire second half of the album can be seen as a response to N.W.A., their beef is crystalized in “The Conflict,” a diss track that systematically attacks each member of N.W.A., excluding Ice Cube, who had already left the group by then. As with previously-described tracks, the group uses the same kind of excessive language to take down N.W.A. that they used to denigrate women, thus engaging N.W.A. in something akin to a recorded game of the Dozens. To DJ Yella, for example, they throw a litany of emasculating labels at him, such as calling him ‘a bi’ for allowing himself to get ‘fucked’ by Eazy-E and label manager Jerry Heller, who were known for severely underpaying members of the group:

Stuck up the bull, 'cause that's how you like it
Rather than mine, Eazy or Dre's
Yella, you're a bi, and you go both ways
Bitch, motherfucker, goddamn bi
Get out our tissue, 'cause I'ma make your ass cry
Yeah, I called you a bitch, and you know it, too
Pimple-faced sucker, fuck you!
You don't get no respect from your own damn crew
So what the fuck you want from my hoe troop?
They call you a pussy, a punk and a fag
So a hoe put a label on your sissy ass

In her verse about Eazy-E, Baby Girl refers to his track "Still Talkin'" where he insists that he "might be a woman beater" but is "not a pussy eater," by describing him performing fellatio upon her in graphic detail before making fun of his Jheri curls and describing getting curl activator stuck in her hands and "wondering if he curled the dick?" They then call Ren a "sad-ass case" who is "the unknown member of N.W.A." suggesting that he is only in the group "because they needed that look of a monster face."

While their verses about Yella, Eazy-E, and Ren are playful, they are more serious in their verse about Dr. Dre, whom they condemn for being a real-life woman beater for abusing his ex-fiancée, R&B singer Michel'le. Agreeing with the sentiment behind N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police," however, they suggest that Dre deserves the wrath of a "pimp producer," and maintain that disputes should be settled within the community instead of through law enforcement intervention:

Hold up, I've got something else to say
It's about this man they call Dr. Dre
It was something about you I couldn't pinpoint
But it came to me when I smoked that joint
I know your ass is strange, it's not quite right
You proved it to me by fighting a bitch that night

You picked up a chair, and bashed her head
Had it been me, your ass'd been dead
Throwing a nose, called your ass out
Michel'le, know what I'm talking about?
"No More Lies" is the name of that hit
You're talking loud, but you ain't saying shit
Try to come back with that old-ass rap
Fuck the police, your ass should be slapped
You need to take lessons from a pimp producer
Dre, you ain't nothing but a motherfucking loser

Engaging in a signifying game with N.W.A., H.W.A. work within gangsta rap to challenge the misogyny of N.W.A. without acquiescing to state power. While N.W.A.'s following album *Efil4Zaggin* was, if anything, more sexually obscene than *Straight Outta Compton*, where they doubled down on their violent descriptions of women in tracks like "One Less Bitch" and "She Swallowed It," to name just two, Eazy-E nevertheless signed H.W.A. to Ruthless Records for their second release, an L.P. title *Az Much Ass Azz U Want* in 1994. Further, subsequent hardcore female gangsta rappers who made marks on the scene had to contend with the precedent the group set in exploring the dialectic between hypersexuality and power in their personas, whether or not they agreed with H.W.A.'s representational strategies. While the group never achieved the sales or recognition that N.W.A. did, they helped establish the potential for gangsta rap to represent a space where those who felt disrespected or victimized could work through their differences internally.

In repurposing the cartoonishly vulgar rhetoric and representational style that rappers like N.W.A. used to both speak truth to power and subjugate women, female rappers like H.W.A. established their presence in the scene by entering into a dialogue with them. This would become an important quality of gangsta rap

that is lost when female rappers are ignored and the misogyny undergirding songs like “A Bitch is a Bitch” is made to represent a consensus within the genre.

While it would be a significant stretch to say that H.W.A.’s debauchery is meaningfully liberatory in itself, this dialogic quality underpins gangsta rap’s political potential. One reason why gangsta rap has had such a lasting impact on contemporary social movement is its ability to imagine worlds where the process of reconciling antagonisms is a source of power that binds communities together and makes them stronger. For communities that are rendered surplus because of their compounding differences and thus subjected to institutionalized repression, gangsta rap can be a way to understand the nature of their vulnerability to state power and also to imagine alternative ways of being.

A dialogic reading of gangsta rap that insists upon leaving women’s contributions intact allows us to see how its sexual politics are part of a broader dialectic of difference that gangsta operates within. Within this dialectic, symbolically playing with social antagonisms is a means of attaching disparate voices into the same discourse community, which works dialogically to build an idealistic impression that signifies upon the real world. What must be understood is that female gangsta rappers asserted their presence within this signifying community, thus becoming invested in its growth. By ignoring their presence entirely while criticizing the genre’s intrinsic sexism, gangsta rap’s opponents fatally devalue the work women have already done to begin addressing the problems within their discursive – and lived – communities.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

“The basic tension in the black woman’s relationship with the black man is often centered in his psychological emasculation and in the black woman’s reaction to his pain. She anguished over his tragedy, and too often in unreasoning, cruel resentment she will praise the reputed superior virtues of white men the hated cripples of his manhood. She may goad him, prod him unmercifully to be a man, and then, fearing his bloody destruction by racist cops and other killers stalking the ghettos, she will beg him not to rise up, not to be a man.

- Iceberg Slim, “Racism and the Black Revolution” (105)

As one of the spiritual founding fathers of gangsta rap, Iceberg Slim is known for his written accounts of life as a pimp in Southern California in the late 1960s and 1970s. While his books are often said to glamorize the violent relationships between pimps and prostitutes, Slim was horrified by the manipulative games he witnessed pimps playing on the women they aimed to control. In his essay “Racism and the Black Revolution,” Slim prods at the roots of this relationship by suggesting that the sexual economy black pimps and prostitutes maintain is ultimately expressive of an underlying white patriarchal power structure. In order to maintain their own sexual primacy, Slim suggests, white men kill black men and leave black women in fearful admiration of white male virility. A black revolutionary consciousness is therefore rendered impossible, he posits, because black men and women are left hating one another and unable to come together in shared resistance. What forms instead is a pimp-prostitute relationship that is based on mutual objectification and hatred.

He writes “I believe that the lower sexual and beauty rating of the darker complexioned female by most black men is greatly responsible for her appearance

in the overwhelming majority among armies of street hustlers in the many cities I have visited across the nation. Because she is an overshadowed underdog, essentially deprived of the chance to win herself a dependable, desirable man and thereby security and a sense of self-esteem, she is an easy mark for the gaudy black pimp and his hypnotic castles in the air.”¹⁴⁶ While Slim’s psychoanalytic account of the pimp-prostitute relationship is perhaps too dismissive of the material roots of black poverty and idealizes an essentialist notion of a suppressed black heterosexual manhood as the symbol of black revolutionary potential, he nevertheless provides a proto-intersectional vision where a black revolution is predicated upon the ability of the community to overcome the manipulative violence that defines the relationship between men and women. In other words, he provides the groundwork for thinking of a black revolution as a loving act that is achieved through reconciling antagonisms within the community.

The fashioning of the relationship between black men and women as a primary analytic for the state of the black community is a common thread in black revolutionary thinking. While I suggested in Chapter II that one of the reasons so many African American political leaders opposed gangsta rap in the early 1990s was because of such a concern and a desire to impose heteropatriarchal family structure on poor black urban communities, ‘love’ does not have to stand for the relations that bind the heterosexual family together and sustain neoliberal ideology. Indeed, in bell hooks’s mediation on love and revolution, she writes that the family structure can be a source of both love and abuse, and that the private

¹⁴⁶ Iceberg Slim, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1996), 105.

family home “is the one institutionalized sphere of power that can easily be autocratic and fascistic,” especially for children who are quite literally trapped within its confines.¹⁴⁷ Love is important in revolutionary theory because “all great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic,” and she suggests that any revolutionary act must be based on a theory of love, as love stands for what is built during the process of reconciling difference.¹⁴⁸ Love, then, holds an elemental community together as other social structures are dismantled. As Angela Davis demonstrates in her groundbreaking scholarship of the black woman’s role in antebellum slave revolutions, it is in fact the concept of a ‘shared community’ that makes a revolt meaningful. Identifying a “strange twist of affairs” built into the structure of chattel slavery, she notes that “in the infinite anguish of ministering to the needs of the men and children around her (who were not necessarily members of her immediate family), she was performing the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor.¹⁴⁹ In other words, unlike male laborers who were totally alienated from the labor they were forced to do, the work that women were forced to do, including maintaining slave quarters and carrying progeny, led to the formation of a consciousness that allowed slaves to see themselves as part of a community worth risking their lives to liberate. Love – for

¹⁴⁷ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper University Press, 2001), 20.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁴⁹ Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2 (Winter – Spring, 1972): 87.

self, other, and community – becomes the seed of resistance that makes liberatory struggle possible.

Thus far, I have made the case that the sexual politics of gangsta rap have been misunderstood, and that recognizing the work done by female gangsta rappers helps paint a more complex picture of the genre. In Chapter II, I suggested that the mass interpretation of gangsta rap as a genre that was said to demonstrate the lack of discipline and heteropatriarchal family values among black urban youth in the early 1990s was attached to the project of building a ‘color blind’ neoliberal State through prison expansion and welfare reform. In Chapter III, I highlighted the work and representational strategies of some of the heretofore unacknowledged and underacknowledged female gangsta rappers – such as H.W.A., Bo\$\$, NiNi X, and Menajahtwa – who were part of the Los Angeles rap scene at this time. I suggested here that a more complex sexual politics of gangsta rap emerged when the genre was thought of dialogically by placing the work of male rappers in dialogue with the work of female rappers.

While I attempted to show how gangsta rap is a genre that allows artists to imagine alternative worlds and alternative ways of being, it is still worth asking whether gangsta rap is a genre with meaningful liberatory potential. In Chapter III, especially, I focused on albums that embodied the “rhetoric of wreck” and therefore tended to frame the relationship between men and women at least somewhat antagonistically. H.W.A. spent half of their album attacking N.W.A., Menajahtwa portrayed themselves as vicious man eaters, and Bo\$\$ worked to shed all sexual signifiers with her persona while showing a relative indifference to

men. Of the artists I profiled, only NiNi X, a member of the Bloods who collaborated closely with male Crip member Tweedy Bird Loc, emphasized the value of cross-gender collaboration in her album.

One of my primary interventions in Chapter III was to identify a dialectics within gangsta rap where music by female rappers can function as the antithesis of gangsta rap's more misogynistic content. To stop the analysis here risks reinforcing an understanding of gangsta rap as an antagonistic and hateful genre whose value, if any, is limited to its ability to instill a sense of righteousness in its listeners. But gangsta rap also has the potential of being a loving genre that artists use to imagine the possibility of a future where painful differences are reconciled instead of destroyed. While gangsta rap is rarely described as a loving genre, it is important to understand that many artists turned to gangsta rap precisely because it allowed them the opportunity to spread love and hope to the socially-dispossessed.

According to Ice-T, whose name pays homage to Iceberg Slim, gangsta rap was originally conceived as a way to encourage unity and bonding to combat antagonisms based on differences of race and gang affiliation. He explains how one of his main prerogatives in his work as a youth gang advocate in the years following the 1992 Los Angeles Riots was to teach young gang affiliates that meaningful progress could only be achieved through cross-ghetto collaboration. He especially encouraged them to resist attempts by the LAPD to incite cross-racial violence:

Our ghettos are mixing, because it's about being poor. The Mexican kids hang right out with the Black brothers. There's not much difference at all. We low-ride, we say "homeboy," we kick it. There's no big difference, but they're trying to create one, because they're so afraid of the Blacks and Mexicans bonding. If we bond, this city will be in serious trouble.¹⁵⁰

While Ice-T casually centers his discussion on male gang members, calling gang-banging "male love pushed to its limits," he emphasizes that his gang advocacy, like his gangsta rap, is centered on getting youth to understand that gang membership is already based on love and desire for family, bonding, and community, despite the abject violence that surrounds them. "I'm trying to bring it full circle," he explains, "understanding that it's madness, mayhem, and wrong, but there's a lot of honor that goes on in this... to the layman it will look like it's a world based on hate, but it's not, it's based on love."¹⁵¹

As I bring my thesis to a close, I would like to explore the sexual dimensions of what it means to think about gangsta rap as a loving genre that works not only to rebuke, but also overcome antagonisms based on sexual difference. In Chapter II, I suggested that the attempt to regulate gangsta rap in the early 1990s was tied to other attempts at regulating populations that were seen as post-industrial and post-civil rights 'surplus' whose multiple forms of embodied difference as poor urban African Americans left them unprotected from race-based political suppression. One reason gangsta rap was so important in this context was because it allowed socially-dispossessed populations to depict and

¹⁵⁰ Ice-T, "Foreword" in *Uprising: Crips and Bloods Tell the Story of America's Youth in the Crossfire*, ed. Yusuf Jah and Sister Shah'Keyah (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 15.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

question the violent reality within which they lived. In Chapter III, however, I described gangsta rap as a highly symbolic genre that allowed rappers to build imagined worlds populated by larger-than-life characters who could use their difference to symbolically signify on real-life power structures. This dialectic play between material reality and symbolic fantasy allowed artists to perform from the social location of surplus while imagining worlds where their social difference is a source of power.

Gangsta Rap's 'Erotics'

After accounting for gangsta rap's status as a signifying practice Robin D.G. Kelley notes that "when gangsta rappers do write lyrics intended to convey a sense of social realism, their work loosely resembles a sort of street ethnography of racist institutions and social practices."¹⁵² Indeed, one way that this dialectic between reality and fantasy is expressed in gangsta rap is in the way that artists locate themselves between dangerous street encounters with authority figures and house party scenes where these figures are absent. In contrast, when gangsta rappers take the genre to its most idealistic and utopian potential, they tend to depict scenes either removed from the streets, or on a version of the streets where those who are subjected to police violence in real life are powerful enough to claim ownership of the space. Parties and communal spaces tend to represent

¹⁵² Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 190.

gangsta rap's utopian ideal, and as a rule are places where sexual difference is expressed lovingly and with respect.

As ideals where the reconciliation of difference is defined by a feeling or sensibility of having a good time, parties can be said to point to the 'erotic' power of gangsta rap. Audre Lorde argues that the erotic is an oppositional form of power that is generated from within the individual based on their relationships to others, and is thus able to be an oppositional force to forms of power that are enacted upon communities marked by difference. She distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic by explaining that "to share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feeling as we would use a Kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us."¹⁵³ Calling the erotic "the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge," she suggests that the erotic has the potential to form communities based on a shared desire to achieve a feeling otherwise unable to be felt, and can give these communities a purpose as they work to build a world the "feels right" for those whose feelings are otherwise controlled and suppressed.¹⁵⁴

House parties in gangsta rap are spaces unmonitored by both police and parents and are symbols of the potential for community to form out of the failure of authority figures to fully control the lives of poor black youth. In Chapter III, I described how the 'hoe house' that H.W.A. located themselves within was a space

¹⁵³ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 58.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

that represented the recording studio and the group's ability to provide musical pleasure to their listeners, and suggested that the song "Funk Me" depicted party dancing as a playful act of defiance in the face of rap censors. As gangsta rap continued to develop into the 1990s, a party ideal came to represent the oppositional unity achieved when separation due to misogyny, gang violence, and hard drugs are able to be overcome and party-goers are able to join together to dance in the face of suppressive authority.

For example, in the music video for "California Love," 2Pac depicts Oakland as a raging post-apocalyptic party taking place inside a repurposed Thunder Dome from *Mad Max*. In this vision of the future, California has turned into a desert wasteland and society as we know it has been eradicated. For 2Pac and guest artist Dr. Dre, the total collapse of social authority actually affords young African American men and women the opportunity to party and cruise through the desert together freely. In this vision of utopia, violence is only sanctioned so as to maintain this ideal – in one of the final scenes, a male raider on a motorcycle who jumps onto a desert rover to harass a woman is thrown out of the vehicle and left tumbling across the desert while 2Pac and a group of women laugh and throw taunts at him (Figure 4.1).

Similarly, in the music video for the song "Piru Love" from the album *Bangin' on Wax*, a collaborative project between members of the Bloods and the Crips street gangs made as part of a broader attempt at ending violence between the gangs in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Riots, shots of a party on the streets with men and women wearing the colors of both gangs symbolize the kind of

reconciliation that the album hopes to help achieve (Figure 4.2). This is not only expressed visually in the music video of “Piru Love,” but also in the sex of the rappers. While several members of the Bloods have verses on this track, the most memorable performance is by NiNi X, who went by Bloody Mary for this project. In the opening verse of this poignant track, Bloody Mary draws an oral map of the “Bity of Bompton” and locates various Bloods sets within it.¹⁵⁵ While the following verses that alternate between her and fellow Bloods rapper Redrum 781 describe acts of hyperviolent retribution against members of the Crips, Bloody Mary’s opening verse along with the nostalgia-inducing sampling from Zapp & Roger’s “Computer Love” establish that the track is fundamentally about a familial love that connects all members of the Bloods. This point is driven home in the final verse by Lil’ Leak, which memorializes fallen male and female family members.



Figure 4.1 – Throwing a raider out of the desert rover from the music video for “California Love”

¹⁵⁵ Members of the Bloods often replace the letter C with the letter B at the start of words as a way of asserting their primacy over the Crips.



Figure 4.2 – A party on the streets of L.A. consisting of men and women wearing the colors of both the Bloods and the Crips from the music video for “Piru Love”

Both “California Love” and “Piru Love” use gangsta rap to depict scenes of communal unity based on respect for difference. As representations of gangsta rap at its most idealistic where real problems are imagined to be momentarily overcome, these songs stretch reality to imagine worlds that have yet to be built. Although I emphasized the rhetorical contestation that takes place within albums by female gangsta rappers in Chapter III, I would like to close this thesis by showing how gangsta rap also allowed men and women to mutually redefine their relationships to one another through musical collaborations.

From Battle of the Sexes to Bonnie and Clyde: Yo-Yo’s Collaborations with Ice Cube

Gangsta rap albums are often deeply collaborative. Of the thirteen tracks comprising the contentious *Doggystyle*, for example, “Tha Shiznit” is the only

song where Snoop Doggy Dogg performs solo. Because of the frequency of collaborations within gangsta rap, solo artists can become associated with one another and achieve iconic status as a duo. While the most famous of these duos is Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg, duos between women and men are not uncommon, including NiNi X and Tweedy Bird Loc, and, more famously, Ice Cube and Yo-Yo.

Yolanda “Yo-Yo” Whitaker is a somewhat problematic figure in the context of gangsta rap. The only female rapper from Los Angeles to achieve and maintain mainstream success, Yo-Yo is often thought of as somehow separated from the gangsta rap genre. Cheryl Keyes, for example, explicitly refers to Yo-Yo as a “non-gangsta rapper” while noting that she was the only rap artist in the Los Angeles scene to be invited to testify during the 1994 congressional hearings on gangsta rap.¹⁵⁶ Surveying her musical output paints a complicated picture of her relationship to gangsta rap. Known locally as one of the only – and best – female rappers while attending school in Los Angeles in the 1980s, she was introduced to the world on Ice Cube’s first solo album *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* on the track “It’s a Man’s World” in 1990. In this track, Yo-Yo represents herself as a proto-feminist defender of women’s rights by engaging Ice Cube in a mock rap battle where the two traded blows over a track structured around a sample from James Brown’s “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World.” Eventually losing the battle on his own album, Ice Cube’s crude claims such that “women, they’re good for nothing, no maybe one thing/to serve needs to my ding-a-ling” and “when it comes to hip-

¹⁵⁶ Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 163.

hop this is a man's world/stay down and play the playground you little girl"
become the grounds for Yo-Yo to both directly expose the illogic underpinning
these sexist claims that were especially associated at the time with N.W.A.'s
music, as well as showcase her virtuosic flow and wordcraft. Consider the
following exchange from the second half of the song:

Ice Cube:

Ay what up buttercup, Miss Yo-Yo
I know you like to rap and like to flow so
But when it comes to hip hop, this is a man's world
Stay down and play the playground, you little girl.

Yo-Yo:

What you're saying I don't consider it as rappin'
'Cause you're on rewind and I'm the new what's happenin'
It never fails, I'll always get respect
And you lose. So take a rain check.

Ice Cube:

Hell no, 'cause you know that I'm first and you're second
If it wasn't for me you probably be pregnant
And barefoot complaining that your back is aching
Shakin' and fakin' while I'm bringin' home the bacon.

Yo-Yo:

Well you're mistaken, it's not going that far
I make brothers like you play the back yard
You used to flow with the title but I took it
Bring home the bacon but find another hoe to cook it.

Ice Cube:

Damn it look it 'cause you're talking a lot of bull.

Yo-Yo:

Well I'm not your puppet so don't even try to pull.

Ice Cube:

This is a man's world, thank you very much.

Yo-Yo:

But it don't mean a thing without a woman's touch.

In an interview with *Billboard*, Yo-Yo explains that she distanced herself from gangsta rap and aligned herself more closely with East Coast female rappers in her first solo album, *Make Way For The Motherlode* in 1991. In her words, “when I first met Ice Cube I had this feminist mentality. That was before I even knew what a feminist was. I came up in the era where N.W.A, was like, ‘A bitch is a bitch.’ So I was in defense of women. All of my songs were like Queen Latifah’s ‘U.N.I.T.Y.’”¹⁵⁷ Indeed, with songs like “Stand Up For Your Rights,” “Sisterland,” and “Girl Don’t Be No Fool,” *Make Way For The Motherlode* is more aligned with the didactic and advocacy style associated with East Coast rappers like Queen Latifah and M.C. Lyte at the time than with the irreverent and figurative West Coast style.

However, Yo-Yo became a fixture in the gangsta rap scene over the years and came to be closely associated with Ice Cube, both as his foil and collaborator. Ice Cube brought Yo-Yo with him in a headlining performance at the Apollo Theater to perform “It’s a Man’s World” on September 8th, 1990, which was cited by Peter Watrous in the *New York Times* as “the highlight of the show.”¹⁵⁸ She would join Ice Cube at the Apollo again to perform “It’s A Man’s World” the following year, and this time was given her own set where she performed songs from *Make Way For The Motherlode*, including “You Can’t Play With My Yo-

¹⁵⁷ Erika Ramirez, “Ladies First: 31 Female Rappers Who Changed Hip-Hop,” *Billboard*, March 31, 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5923011/ladies-first-31-female-rappers-who-changed-hip-hop>.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Watrous, “Review/Pop: Ice Cube’s Hip-Hop Warms Up the Apollo,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/16/arts/review-pop-ice-cube-s-hip-hop-warms-up-the-apollo.html>.

Yo,” a follow-up collaboration between the two in which their relationship is more mutually-supportive.¹⁵⁹ While Yo-Yo distinguished herself from Ice Cube in her set, which Jon Pareles described as “video-friendly” with costume changes and dancing “in the style of Paula Abdul and Janet Jackson,” the evolution of their relationship resulted in Ice Cube changing his own approach to gangsta rap. While Ice Cube played his misogynistic gangsta persona straight in the 1990 performance of “It’s a Man’s World,” he emphasized the character’s flaws in the 1991 reprise. In their 1990 performance, Watrous explains that the two elicited an “equally vociferous response” from the audience, making him conclude that “no one came out ahead... the record had dissolved into a traditional battle of the sexes, no better of no worse.” In 1991, however, Yo-Yo drew a stronger response from the audience and Ice Cube ended the song goading the audience to hurl invectives at him. Ice Cube brought this performative self-awareness into the rest of his set as well by cuing the audience to heckle his most misogynistic lines in “Once Upon a Time in the Projects,” and telling his audience “don’t look up to me” at one point.

As a product of the L.A. hip hop scene, *Make Way For the Motherlode* does contain elements that tie Yo-Yo to the West Coast school of rap. It is filled with characteristically West Coast P-Funk samples, with the title track even prominently featuring what would become perhaps the most iconic G-Funk sample from Parliament’s “The Mothership Connection” several years before Dr.

¹⁵⁹ Jon Pareles “Review/Rap: Ice Cube the ‘Gangsta’ Heats Up the Apollo,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/18/arts/review-rap-ice-cube-the-gangsta-heats-up-the-apollo.html>.

Dre would use it in “Let Me Ride.” Additionally, while Yo-Yo herself stays in radio-friendly territory in her songs, her album as a whole nods at the signifying tradition through a series of spoken skits in which a smooth-voiced male radio DJ provides sometimes irreverent commentary on the album. In “Cube Gets Played,” for example, the DJ tells the listener “I definitely got played today... Ice Cube came in here and tried to take over the station” but follows up by saying “his ass is in jail right now.” In “Outro,” the DJ closes the album by welcoming the next DJ to the set, telling the listener “I’ll see you out there at the show. So be there, huh?” before unexpectedly calling out Ice Cube’s crew saying “Lench Mob, I hate your ass. Peace.”

The collaborative track “You Can’t Play With My Yo-Yo” perhaps best articulates Yo-Yo’s double-rootedness in the gangsta rap world and in the tradition of strong and independent female rappers of the early 90s. Even the two-line hook itself – the first of which is Ice Cube saying “You can’t play with my Yo-Yo” and the second is a sample from Queen Latifah’s “Wrath of My Madness” saying “don’t try to play me out, don’t try to play me out” – is expressive of these two primary influences. She also integrates a number of gangsta rap signifiers into her persona as “the brand new intelligent black lady.” Although she distinguishes herself from H.W.A. immediately by insisting off the bat that “my name is Yo-Yo, I’m not a hoe,” she also cautions against underestimating her in the first verse:

I rock the mic, they say I’m not lady-like
But I’m a lady who will pull a stunt through
I kill suckas and even hit the block
So what you wanna do?

While she focuses on her strength as a woman in this song, stating, for example, that she raps “about upright uplifting the woman for they are superior... to any male,” she augments her persona with descriptions that are pulled from the gangsta rap lexicon, such as when she claims to “pack a real small gat in [her] purse.”

In her second album, *Black Pearl*, Yo-Yo continued to both align herself with her East Coast counterparts by rapping about women’s empowerment while asserting her connection to the West Coast scene more strongly than before. She fashions herself as a funky homegirl superhero in the track “Cleopatra” who protects girls from being harassed by men and encourages her listeners to wear protection. While this is a theme she explored in the previous album, she redefines what it means to be an “intelligent black woman” by encouraging her listeners to also question the government’s role in bringing crack to the inner city resulting to “brothers getting arrested” and women giving birth to addicted babies in the second verse:

I see a lot of brothers getting arrested
‘Cause my neighborhood’s infested
With the crack and the cocaine
Who’s the mack with the no-name?
Is it Bush or Quayle?
See, something smells fishy
And it ain’t Miss Pretty

Ice Cube was her executive producer, and his influence can clearly be heard throughout the album. In “Home Girl Don’t Play Dat,” for example, she encourages girls to defend themselves against predatory men by signifying on Ice

Cube's track "How to Survive in South Central," and a line from "Fuck tha Police" in which he states that "you'd rather see me in the pen than me and Lorenzo rolling in a Benz-o," as well as his persona as "the wrong nigga to fuck with" in the first two lines of the first verse, before alluding to the rising social tensions that underpinned the Los Angeles Riots just two months before the album's release:

How to survive in South Central?
Rule number one: don't fuck with a nigga in a Benz-o
It's '92 and shit is getting hectic
So if you get naked stay protected
And keep an open eye for people smoking high

In this album, Yo-Yo synthesizes East Coast empowerment narratives with West Coast street knowledge by creating a superhero persona who uplifts black women and fights for sisterhood but is also firmly located within South Central. While pre-dating the gangsta rap morality panic examined in Chapter II, reviews of the album expressed an ambivalence over this synthesis that foreshadows the full-fledged hysteria that would emerge the following year. The *Entertainment Weekly* praised the album for being "a much-needed reassertion of feminine dignity from the all-too-misogynistic West Coast rap scene," while the *Los Angeles Times* noted that listening to the album is "like taking a tour through South-Central" and took issue with her use of the N-word in songs like "Home Girl Don't Play Dat," concluding that "making a point is something Yo Yo is good at, but not when it means pushing the type of dis-or-be-dissed rhetoric of rap that doesn't propel *anybody* down the road to self-esteem."¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Arion Berger, "Music Review: 'Black Pearl'," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 7, 1992; Connie Johnson, "Yo Yo, 'Black Pearl'," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1992.

Like other artists in the L.A. scene, Yo-Yo's approach to rap was profoundly impacted by the riots that ravaged Los Angeles between April 29th and May 4th, 1992. Following the riots, Yo-Yo became more outspoken about how the concept of female-male coalition needed to be part of a broader project of exploring how the roots of black oppression are connected to the systemic inequality that made the riots inevitable. In a piece by the *New York Times* examining the relationship between rap music and the riots published on May 26th, Yo-Yo was among those interviewed along with N.W.A. and Ice Cube and East Coast rappers KRS-One and Sister Souljah. Describing herself as a "feminist to the heart," she emphasized how women's lives are impacted by the same systemic problems that her male counterparts explore in South Central and explains that the message in "Home Girl Don't Play Dat" is that "as a woman, you can't take no wooden nickels, no short cuts, no fast guy in a Cadillac because you'll fall into the system of being on welfare, of using drugs or getting pregnant or being a member of a gang. It's so easy to fall into that system because we're trapped in a vicious cycle."¹⁶¹

Yo-Yo also contributed a verse alongside Ice Cube, Kam, King Tee, MC Eiht, B-Real, and J-Dee on the post-riot single "Get the Fist," a track whose proceeds were used to support rebuilding efforts and which the *New York Times* aptly called "probably the most belligerent charity singles ever made." While this is possibly still-true descriptor, the majority of the verses emphasize the need for

¹⁶¹ Sheila Rule, "Rappers Say the Riots Were No Surprise To Their Listeners," *New York Times*, May 26, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/26/news/rappers-say-the-riots-were-no-surprise-to-their-listeners.html>.

love and community as a symbol of healing and sustained defiance. MC Eiht, a Crip affiliate, for example, calls for an end to gang violence by directing one's focus against white supremacy stating "gang of blue, fuck the white, I'm down with the red." J-Dee similarly expresses hope at seeing "the Bloods and Crips waving big black banners." In her verse, Yo-Yo emphasizes the need for women and men to overcome their differences and unify as a similar act of defiance:

Yeah, you can play that role like you ain't with it if you wanna
But it's on to the break of dawn
I said it's just 'a few good men' when we were fighting
I guess it'll be more good men now we're united
Now all of a sudden they wanna bring in troops
Niggas in my hood been getting loose and bucking fools
But now we're getting wiser, you can tell by the fires
That they're fed up, the war is on us

Released one year after the riots and in the midst of the anti-gangsta rap morality scare, Yo-Yo continued along this line in her third album, *You Better Ask Somebody*. If Yo-Yo only obliquely referenced a gangsta rap sensibility in previous albums, there could be no mistaking it in this one. After expressing disappointment in her use of the N-word the previous year, Connie Johnson wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that "on Yo-Yo's two previous albums, it was easy to lump her into a convenient category with other accessible, Afro-centric female rappers such as Queen Latifah. But this time, the Los Angeles ally of Ice Cube joins many of her male rap brethren in glorifying the gangsta ideology," and reverses her previous year's criticism by emphasizing that "the unsavoriness of

her message doesn't lessen its impact. This is one of the most riveting records – rap or otherwise – of the year.”¹⁶²

Yo-Yo's new persona on this album is not a funky superheroine but an armed and deadly mackstress whose motto is “a woman's gotta do what a woman's gotta do,” a line sampled from “Home Girl Don't Play Dat” and made into the hook of the track “Mackstress.” In fact, this track shares a structural and thematic similarity with “Home Girl Don't Play Dat” as both tracks are comprised of three verses that end with a repeating refrain of “homegirl don't play that” and “don't let those motherfuckers mack you,” respectively. Additionally, both begin by describing the need to protect oneself from male exploitation before complicating this binary by examining its structural roots. As “Home Girl Don't Play Dat” looks at how the crack epidemic accounts for both the mass incarceration of men and the epidemic of male sexual exploitation of women, “Mackstress” questions what ties together black men and women's exploitation. In the second verse, Yo-Yo describes a scenario in which a woman is arrested after being tricked by her man into transferring drugs for him. In the third verse, she is asked to inform on him to avoid a prison sentence, and realizes “they wanna protect you while they hang your nigga.” She ends the track angry at both the criminal justice system and the man who used her as a mule, not knowing who to trust.

As the relationship between “Home Girl Don't Play Dat” and “Mackstress” demonstrates, Yo-Yo does not reinvent herself in this album so

¹⁶² Connie Johnson. “YoYo: Gritty as the Streets of L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1993, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-07-11/entertainment/ca-11963_1_ice-cube.

much as she continues to explore the same set of themes while more fully embracing the gangsta rap style. This allowed Yo-Yo to express anger and pain more openly than she did previously, but she also used the idiom to explore themes of love, respect, and political unity with a new depth precisely at the time when critics were beginning to define gangsta rap as a hateful and even criminally-negligent genre. In the third verse of “Westside Story,” Yo-Yo describes meeting “a G of another type” who is “down with revolution” which results in her reevaluating her political values:

He don't want to slap it, flip it, rub it
He just want to check it and protect it
And when the riots jumped off he showed power
Serving more cocktails than happy hour
He told me that the government never was a friend of me
But the real enemy
So now I do dirt of a different kind
'Cause now Yo-Yo has got a different mind
Never did like a mark, 'cause marks just bore me
I'm coming with a Westside Story

As with her previous albums, Yo-Yo collaborated closely with Ice Cube on this album. Unlike on “It’s a Man’s World,” the skits on *Make Way For the Motherlode*, or even the opening lines of “Home Girl Don’t Play Dat,” however, Yo-Yo does not signify *on* Ice Cube as much as she signifies *with* him in the duo track “The Bonnie and Clyde Theme.” The most commercially-successful track on *You Better Ask Somebody*, the song reached the top spot on the Billboard Hot Rap Singles and exemplifies the ideal of reconciliation made possible through gangsta rap. Set over a sample from James Brown’s “The Payback,” Yo-Yo and Ice Cube imagine themselves as a contemporary version Bonnie and Clyde who

use their differences strategically to evade police and talk down the racist system that holds both of them back.

Both Ice Cube and Yo-Yo reference lines from earlier collaborations, but as a means of pointing out the extent of their mutual growth and asserting their newfound strength together. Ice Cube opens the track by revising the phrase “It’s a Man’s World” by adding “but check the girl with the Mac-11, 1-8-7.” Yo-Yo similarly repurposes the line from “You Can’t Play With My Yo-Yo” where she warns men not to underestimate her because she carries a “real small gat” in her purse by redirecting her aim away from male MCs and towards the police:

I’m the type of girl that’s down for my nigga
I’ll lie for my nigga, peel a cap for my nigga
See he don’t mind me flirting, wearing tight skirts and (sic)
‘Cause when it’s all over it’s curtains
What they don’t know won’t hurt
They searching on him, I got the gat in my skirt

In the final verse, Yo-Yo seems to ironically address the concerns of gangsta rap’s increasingly vocal critics by claiming to gain strength by embodying its most debased qualities:

See that gangsta mentality drove niggas to insanity
You wanna be down to kill a whole fucking family
You can lock us up if you want, don’t matter
But give ‘em a bail and we’ll be right back at ya
Don’t underestimate me when you’re near me
Got my clamp off safety, that’ll make you hate me
Frankly, I don’t give a damn, once again I slam
You’d better ask who I am

Between 1990 and 1993, Yo-Yo and Ice Cube mutually redefined gangsta rap for themselves. Between “It’s a Man’s World” and “The Bonnie and Clyde Theme,” their musical relationship transformed from lighthearted opposition to

loving coalition, and it was gangsta rap that brought them together at a time when South Central Los Angeles seemed to be on the verge of quite literally falling apart. In light of Yo-Yo's almost total embrace of the gangsta rap idiom by 1993 as the ideal means of representing the power that could be achieved through reconciling sexual antagonisms, the fact that she was asked to testify against the intrinsic sexism of gangsta rap by the Congressional Black Caucus in 1994 speaks to the almost total lack of knowledge the governing body had about the genre and the community they were trying to legislate. Motivated to act based on a fear-mongering discourse about a discourse, the genre's opponents made gangsta rap into an open signifier that seemed to point to the hypermasculine criminality of poor black young men and their entire community's inability to discipline themselves. But as artist like Yo-Yo show, gangsta rap is not intrinsically sexist, and could even be used to encourage men and women to reconcile their differences and see the strength gained when members of a community respect one another.

Won't Stop (Beyoncé ft. Kendrick Lamar): The BET Awards and the Future of the Gangsta Style

The gangs of L.A. will never die – just multiply

- "Colors," Ice-T

The arrest of Ruthless Records mogul Marion "Suge" Knight for vehicular homicide during the filming of *Straight Outta Compton* prompted prominent hip

hop scholar and activist James Braxton Peterson to declare in *The Guardian* on February 2nd, 2015 that “gangsta rap is dead.”¹⁶³ Urban America has changed, he insists, and while drugs, crime, and gang violence still exist, “we have certainly moved on from the unchecked celebration of it.” Only three months later, however, Peterson wrote another piece for *The Guardian* in which he called Los Angeles rapper Kendrick Lamar’s album *To Pimp a Butterfly* a “masterpiece” which proves that “rap music is a living, breathing repository of black musical genius. And as such, its cultural and musical prominence is here to stay.”¹⁶⁴

By fashioning Suge Knight’s arrest as a symbol of the death of gangsta rap and Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* as a symbol of rap music’s persistence, Peterson acknowledges the centrality of Los Angeles rap in hip hop’s past and future, but he erects a wall between the two when it would have been just as easy to build a bridge. In fact, 2015 represented something of a renaissance of West Coast gangsta rap after several years of chart dominance by Southern dance hits and industry-backed super moguls like Jay-Z and Kanye West. Perhaps in an attempt to capitalize on the hype surrounding the N.W.A. biopic, 2015 saw the high-profile release of highly collaborative albums by Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, The Game, and Kendrick Lamar, all of whom forged a generational connection between one another. On “Genocide,” the third track of Dr. Dre’s *Compton*,

¹⁶³ James Braxton Peterson, “Gangsta Rap is Dead – and Suge Knight’s Arrest has Buried It,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/02/gangsta-rap-dead-suge-knight-arrest-compton-hip-hop>.

¹⁶⁴ James Braxton Peterson, “Roll Over, Rock’N’Roll – Rap Music is Here to Stay,” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/08/rap-rock-us-music-hip-hop>.

Kendrick Lamar appears alongside Dre and two women – R&B singer Marsha Ambrosius, and South African-born and L.A.-based singer Candice Pillay.

Punning on the concept of ‘black genocide’ and ‘lyrical genocide,’ Kendrick acknowledges his gangsta roots in his verse with references to projects buildings, dead homies, and Compton:

Ahh, shit!
Recognize what lives inside these eyes I’m silent ‘til the dead has risen
Live in a project building, dodgin’ the module ceilings
I ride, I’m a ride in a stolen Jeep
...
My discretion, fuck your blessing, fuck your life
Fuck your hope, fuck your mama
Fuck your daddy, fuck your dead homie
Fucked the world up when we came up, that’s Compton homie

He also appears in “On Me” on The Game’s *Documentary 2* where he even more explicitly places himself in a gangsta rap lineage the runs between Dr. Dre, The Game (referred to as Chuck), and himself:

Bitch I’m brought up with the homies, that’s on me
24/7, Kendrick revvin’ these cold streets
Know we live by it, die by it, then reincarnate
...
Documentary had identities of where I’m from
Therefore my energy had to make sure the better me won
It ain’t no better one, son, it ain’t no tellin’ me nothin’
Nigga that’s Chuck, Doc Dre, and K, the legacy’s done.

In an interlude, Kendrick shows ambivalence about his mainstream success, and implies to the listener that the mainstream success of *To Pimp a Butterfly* should

not be taken at face value, as it allowed him to signify and profit from the public as an icon who literally comes straight outta Compton:

Oh man, you thought these niggas with attitude would show gratitude?
Fooled you.
From 2015 to infinity it's still bomb weed and Hennessy
I can pimp a butterfly for the energy.

Indeed, Kendrick meditates on his Compton roots and explores the psychological dimensions of his ascent to superstardom in several tracks on *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In “Institutionalized,” he asks “what money got to do with it?” while insisting that he is “trapped inside the ghetto and [he] ain’t proud to admit it.” In the outro, Ruthless Records legend Snoop Dogg suggests that Kendrick not only is part of his lineage, but that his indelible ties to the Compton streets make Hollywood nervous:

[Outro]:
And once upon a time, in a city so divine
Called West Side Compton, there stood a little nigga
He was give foot something, dazed and confused
Talented but still under the neighborhood ruse
You can take your boy out the hood but you can’t take the hood out the homie
Took his show money, stashed it in the mozey wozey
Hollywood’s nervous
Fuck you, goodnight, thank you so much for your service.

It is somewhat contradictory to say that ‘gangsta rap is dead’ while uplifting Kendrick Lamar as the future of hip hop. It would be more appropriate to say that Kendrick Lamar and other L.A.-based rappers of his generation, including Vince Staples, YG, Boogie, Nipsey Hussel, and others, have given gangsta rap a contemporary update. However, it is true that we are living in a different world that the one gangsta rappers of the late 1980s and early 1990s found themselves

in. What were at the time novel policies attempting to discipline the crisis of post-industrial surplus through police and prison expansion have become facts of life in the present. We have become acclimated to seeing recorded evidence of the kind of racialized police violence that gangsta rap made constant reference to and shocked the public when the mainstream media broadcast the video beating of police beating Rodney King in 1991. The aggressive form of gang-busting and suppressive policing that the LAPD pioneered in South Central in the 1980s has become common practice in segregated post-industrial urban spaces throughout the country.

The record industry has changed, as well. Because the L.A. style is sustained primarily by major record labels such as Interscope and Def Jam who are less willing to support risky acts than the local semi-independent labels in L.A. during gangsta rap's early years, female gangsta rappers are even less visible today than they were in the 80s and 90s. But that is not to say that the lovingly hardcore collaborations between male and female artists like NiNi X and Tweedy Bird Loc, the Death Row crew and Lady of Rage, and Ice Cube and Yo-Yo, has been erased from contemporary gangsta rap expressions.

The continuity of this ethos can be seen most prominently in recent collaborations between Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé, especially in their surprising performance of Beyoncé's "Freedom" at the 2016 BET awards. Flanked by black female dancers sporting natural hair or braids and wearing flesh-colored painted leotards and fitted with leather straps, Beyoncé splashed on a stage flooded with water and surrounded by flames, red fog, and flashing lights.

Beyond being visually stunning, her performance was a musical and choreographed staging of black liberation that was watched by millions in real time. While her backup dancers' costumes make reference to the Black Panther Party and its Afrocentric roots, the symbolically opposed elements of water and fire recall the recent tragedies of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans as well as the fires of the Ferguson riots that occurred in response to the murder of Michael Brown. Indeed, Beyoncé uses these competing symbols to situate her notion of revolution-as-coalition within this song. This is most efficiently demonstrated in the stark unaccompanied couplet she sings before each chorus:

I'm telling these tears, "Go and fall away, fall away"
May the last one burn into flames.

Beyoncé turned the revolutionary musical subtext of the song into political text only one week after her BET performance when she responded to the extra-legal murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile by posting an essay also titled "Freedom" on the front page of her website in which she condemns "the killings of young men and women in our communities" and suggests that the struggle against police killings is a fight "for the rights of the next generation... the next young men and women who believe in good." In conceiving of resistance as an act committed by men and women in unity in order to create more just conditions for future generations, Beyoncé foregrounds the sexual politics of liberation. This quality had always been part of the core identity of "Freedom." It stands as the climax of *Lemonade*, following the song "Forward," which features Trayvon Martin's, Eric Garner's, and Michael Brown's mother holding

photographs of their slain son. “Freedom,” which depicts Beyoncé among a multi-generational collective of black women, can be seen as a black feminist realization of this desire to move forward from pain.

FREEDOM

**WE ARE SICK AND TIRED OF THE KILLINGS OF YOUNG
MEN AND WOMEN IN OUR COMMUNITIES.**

**IT IS UP TO US TO TAKE A STAND AND DEMAND THAT THEY
“STOP KILLING US.”**

**WE DON'T NEED SYMPATHY.
WE NEED EVERYONE TO RESPECT OUR LIVES.**

**WE'RE GOING TO STAND UP AS A COMMUNITY AND FIGHT AGAINST
ANYONE WHO BELIEVES THAT MURDER OR ANY VIOLENT ACTION BY
THOSE WHO ARE SWORN TO PROTECT US SHOULD
CONSISTENTLY GO UNPUNISHED.**

**THESE ROBBERIES OF LIVES MAKE US FEEL HELPLESS AND HOPELESS
BUT WE HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS OF
THE NEXT GENERATION, FOR THE NEXT YOUNG MEN AND
WOMEN WHO BELIEVE IN GOOD.**

Figure 4.3 – First four paragraphs of the call-to-action posted on the front page of beyonce.com on July 7, 2016

In an article published on the rap lyrics website genius.com, hip hop feminist Joan Morgan notes that her costuming in the film seemed to intentionally recall iconography of the Yoruba water goddess Oshun, “whose province includes affairs of the heart, (self) love, (re) birth, creativity, community, childbirth,” and explains that Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* can be seen as a richly-layered black feminist work that explores “the exhausting limbo state of hypervisibility and invisibility prescribed for black women by lingering legacies of racism and sexism.”¹⁶⁵

Indeed, there is no contesting that *Lemonade* is likely the most explicitly black

¹⁶⁵ Joan Morgan, “Beyoncé, Black Feminist Art, and this Oshun Bidness: Beyoncé turns her mirror on us on ‘LEMONADE’,” April 30, 2016, <https://genius.com/a/beyonce-black-feminist-art-and-this-oshun-bidness>.

feminist work of its scale, especially to achieve such mainstream visibility in popular culture. But just as Beyoncé incorporates both water and fire in the BET performance of “Freedom,” her notion of liberation is not limited to black sisterhood, though this is certainly a prominent part of it. In addition, Kendrick Lamar’s guest verse in this song emphasizes the importance forming black coalition in order to realize the liberatory impulse of “Freedom.”

This is especially true in the BET performance of “Freedom,” where Kendrick Lamar unexpectedly emerges from a trap door on the catwalk in front of the stage wearing a hoodie to perform his verse, and begins by inserting a new introduction to his verse in the form of chanted couplets punctuated by stomps, splashes, and shouts from the dancers and bursts of flames from the back of the stage. Signifying on Gil Scott-Heron’s famous Black Arts jazz track, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Kendrick suggests that *Lemonade* and popular culture could indeed plant the seed of a revolution because he and Beyoncé had become powerful enough to make it so:

Meet me at the finish line
40 acres, gimme mine.

Revolution televised
Hopin’ that you see the signs.

Meet me at the finish line
40 acres, gimme mine.

Lemonade all the time,
Keep that in mind.

Formation, formation
Exclamation, formation.

Fellow great Americans, hello
This is heritage for my medicine.

In the rest of the verse he blends gangsta rap lyrical tropes with Beyoncé's black feminist take on Black Lives Matter while also referencing the competing symbols of fire and water:

Ten Hail Marys, I meditate for practice
Channel 9 news tell me I'm movin' backwards
...
Six headlights aimin' my direction
Five-O askin' me what's in my possession
Yeah, I keep runnin', jump in the aquaducts
Fire marshalls and hazardous
Smoke alarms on the back of us
But mama, don't cry for me, ride for me
Try for me, live for me
Breathe for me, sing for me
Obviously guidin' me
I could be more than I gotta be
...

Whereas these lyrics express anger at police suppression and the tragedy of the relationship between mother and son in typical gangsta rap fashion, the staging dramatizes the power of male and female coalition. As Kendrick begins rapping about his mother and walks back towards the stage, Beyoncé walks forward and the two meet at the edge between the stage and the catwalk and begin to sway in unison. At the end of his verse, the two meet on the flooded stage for the final chorus. As the dancers lie in rows like corpses, the two kick water at each other symbolizing their mutual rage as well as the power they share as a combined force (Figure 4.3). Notably, this final chorus is only one not preceded by the couplet about desiring one's tears to "burst into flames." It could be said that the rhythmic

splashing against the smoky stage is in fact meant to be interpreted as this explosive manifestation of pain and rage that hopes to bring ‘Freedom’ for future generations.



Figure 4.4 – Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar on stage during the final chorus of “Freedom” at the 2016 BET Awards

This process of reconciling gender and sexual difference so as to grow stronger together seems to be the essence of both “Freedom” and, by extension, *Lemonade*. It is an idea of revolution that is indebted to black feminist theories of revolutionary love as well as to gangsta rap’s strategy of responding to real-world oppression by imagining better worlds that imply what liberation should feel like. Indeed, Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar’s performance of “Freedom” is reminiscent of Yo-Yo and Ice Cube’s “Bonnie and Clyde Theme” in that both use the gangsta rap idiom to stage a form of resistance that are rooted creating respect-based relationships between black men and women.

Gangsta rap is not dead, even if it looks different today. Rather, it has spread beyond the boundaries of Los Angeles and become a part of the fabric of

American popular culture in the present. In the conclusion to her important book on gangsta rap published in 2005 in which she charts the transformation of gangsta rap from an oppositional genre to a market commodity over the years, Eithne Quinn observes that the individualist neoliberal ethos that prompted its depoliticization was waning as rapprochements between races, old and young African Americans, and men and women were once again increasing. Suggesting that “the pendulum has swung so far across, it is time for counter-energies to begin amassing,” she predicts that gangsta rap would play a more prominent role in the future, writing that “as the context begins to change again, this music should be very well equipped to articulate new undercurrents of social disaffection and communal organization.”¹⁶⁶

At the time of this writing, not only is Black Lives Matter proving to be a lasting presence that will define this decade’s form of black liberation politics, but they are leaders in the organized opposition to the reemergence of visible white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements. Further, rhetoric about “fake news” as well as discourse equivocating the violence intrinsic to white supremacy and individual acts of violence committed by anti-fascists show that we are living in a time much like the late 1980s and early 1990s in that regressive political forces are leveraging power against minority populations by controlling the discourse about them. In this context, it is no surprise that gangsta rap is, indeed, becoming a renewed cultural force despite years of focused suppression.

¹⁶⁶ Eithne Quinn, “Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thang: The Culture and Commerce on Gangsta Rap” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 192.

It is therefore time to reevaluate what we know and don't know about the genre. As I have argued in this thesis, gangsta rap's sexual and racial politics deserve reconsideration. It is a complex field that is not distinguished by its misogyny and violence, but by the set of rhetorical and representational strategies that male and female artists alike worked to develop in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is important to understand how readily even those of us who are concerned about the racial and sexual implications of prison growth and welfare cuts accept a pejorative definition of gangsta rap that was developed in order to create public support for these very institutions. Doing so will help make performances of feminist and anti-white supremacist resistance in contemporary popular culture coherent. While we do not know what we will face in the future, it is almost certain that gangsta rap will play a part and it is worth taking the time to make sure that we understand what it's all about.

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