

An Exploration of Spectacular Consumption: Gangsta Rap as Cultural Commodity

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Gangsta rap narratives are treated as testimonials that provoke conflicted strategies for constituting urban African American male identity and social intercourse. I argue that hard-core rap artistry participates in a complex and fluid set of economic exchange relations among the lived experiences of artists, the operations of a consumer culture, and the dictates of rap music industry. The concept of "spectacular consumption" is posited as a discursive template for understanding how rhetorical strategies of self-promotion in gangsta rap artistry alter and are altered by the sophisticated interdependence among private, public, and economic spheres.

I'm a product of your sins / though you say I never heard of ya / a killer, a dope dealer,
gangsta / murderer, merciless maniac / monarch of manipulation / primary focus of your
local police station ... (C.P.O., 1992, p. 51)

It's really sick / young brothers and sisters today have a lack of understanding about what it
really means to be Black ... (Ice Cube, 1991)

* The Spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social
life ... (Debord, 1983)

In 1991, *Rolling Stone* magazine, usually considered to be a liberally hip source of music criticism, seemed to be at a loss to explain the success of the latest album by Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.). "Hell has apparently frozen over," proclaimed the lead to the *Rolling Stone* story detailing the meteoric rise of N.W.A.'s last album as well as the phenomenal popularity of the so-called "gangsta rap" genre (Wilson, 1994, p. B25). The editors of the magazine seemed stupefied when they lamented that the "album was released without a single, a video, or even a track suitable for radio play. So how did it get to the top?" ("Beating up," 1991, p. 65). The answer to such an inquiry is both deceptively simple and surprisingly complex. It appears simple when we assume that market strategists can sell the average American consumer any kind of cultural expression, especially the racially provocative and perverse impulses of hard-core hip hop (Cocks, 1991; see also McAdams, 1991). Since it is both traditional and trendy for mainstream America to exploit and relish black cultural artifacts (hooks, 1990), the glimmering presence of gangsta rap merely stands as another example of a smart, expert market procedure. On the other hand, the answer becomes more complex if we shift from a perspective promoted by an overbearing consumer calculus and move toward a perspective that

explores the ways in which consumerism is altered in correspondence with rap artistry's "political soul" of agitation and mobilization (Lusane, 1994b, p. 58). By shifting perspectives, we are encouraged to assess its "popularity" with a more meaningful discursive frame.

In an effort to explore the controversial and contradictory musical genre known as "gangsta rap," I develop a frame that recognizes the complex interactions among the material conditions of urban living, artistic production, and the culture industry, thus rectifying the problem of analytical isolation often experienced when taking a particular approach to cultural criticism. That is, many scholars have concerned themselves with the structure of hip hop discourse as a means of understanding its symbolic force (Dyson, 1996; see also Rose, 1994). Some critics have deconstructed the machinery of mass reproduction, treating the artifact as mere product of power (Crane, 1992; see also Jameson, 1991; Ewen, 1988). Still other analysts have viewed sociological data gathered in urban communities as the key to unlocking the secrets of hip hop discourse (Lusane, 1994a; see also Bell, 1992; Anderson, 1990). I offer an alternative frame based on the concept of "spectacular consumption" as an interpretive schema for defining and clarifying the relations among hip hop culture, gangsta rap narratives, and the interposition of an expanding rap industrial complex into the American culture industry.

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1983) describes the spectacle as a general condition in a society oriented toward mass consumerism as a way of life. Moreover, the spectacle is constitutive of a separation of sign and signified wherein the market value of the detached image gets magnified—made spectacular—through the processes of mass production and distribution. Importantly, the spectacle is fully realized when the enhanced appearance of the image becomes more significant than the social world it previously represented. Jean Baudrillard (1993) argues that post-industrial societies have perfected modes of artistic replication so as to nearly eradicate the relationship between the sign and the signified, modifying the essence of both. Thus, spectacular consumption describes a process through which the lifeworld of the artist, the meaning of representation, and the operations of the culture industry get transformed based upon terms generated by public consumption of the art.

Elijah Anderson's (1994) conception of "street" and "decent" orientations can be used as a means of ordering and assessing the conflicted and brutal representations of urban living reproduced in the artistic performances of gangsta rap. I will demonstrate the way in which the social configurations of these orientations serve as rhetorical resources for the discursively captured and occupied sites of urban survival and conquest. Gangsta rap narratives are inscribed with compelling rationales concerning making a living in urban America. Artists attempt to offer good reasons supporting the strategies their narrative protagonists use to "make ends." And so, I hope not only to describe and evaluate rap strategies and the lifeworlds that promote them, but by understanding their service to spectacular consumption, critique the character of their relationship with the production of their mass appeal. I argue that the dialectical energies produced by the confrontation between the "street" and "decent" orientations to effecting better urban living provoke conflicting rhetorical strategies for civic life. These narrative strategies enter into a pact with American cultural outlets and are selectively enhanced so that urban (and suburban) youth can share in an artist's attempt to "live large" by replicating and consuming the imagery. I also contend that spectacular consumption can, in part, be seen as the cause and effect of a reproduction of the "street" orientation as the means for successful performance in both public and private sectors. Thus, spectacular consumption's tendency to commodify, over-value, and sell the "street" orientation must be recognized and critiqued. Lastly, I intend to show how this seller's market advertising gangsta rap artistry, in more than just a figurative way, also provides the "juice" for the invention of creative possibilities for reconstituting the terms of "making ends." But, in order to see more clearly the "public" and "private" self-performances of many urban youth and to hear the words of dissent and "dissing," let us begin our exploration on the streets.

The Street Orientation of the "Young and the Ruthless"

Playing on the name of a popular daytime soap opera, ABC's *World News Tonight's* Peter Jennings labeled the teenage perpetrators of crime "the young and the ruthless" as he reported the grim statistics on the escalation in violent teenage crime. The criminal activity of today's youth, as well as the likelihood of their meeting with violent death had risen several hundred percentage points since 1988 (*World News Tonight*, 1994). But, as so often happens in these days of hit-and-run reporting, the story veered away from any substantive account of poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, broken dreams and shattered hearts to discuss President Clinton's crime bill. What frequently escapes public scrutiny is the fact that people living in these communities are pulled by contentious orientations toward self-empowerment and survival. However, for the University of Pennsylvania's Elijah Anderson, what the popular media overlooks in its search for tidy conclusions to its grim headlines becomes the special site of sociological inquiry.

Anderson (1994) identifies two conflicting worldviews ordering social interaction in urban America—"street" and "decent." According to Anderson, the "street" orientation is represented as a culture "whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society" (Anderson, 1994, p. 82). On the streets, a different set of rules and guidelines structure interpersonal interaction, and one's ignorance of them can lead to unfortunate consequences. Thus, even though the majority of families in urban environments promote "decent" values, their children must be schooled in the ways of the street for self-defense. Conversely, a "decent" family is a loving, nurturing unit that has internalized traditional, mainstream American values—especially those associated with education and a strong work ethic. Children from these families tend to have a vital respect for themselves and others, constructing social and psychological living quarters out of the lessons passed on through meaningful interaction with community "old heads" (Anderson, 1990, p. 65). This issue is important for the present study for two reasons. First, many of the vital directions about the performance of "blackness" and "black manhood," as themes in a larger historical drama, get reproduced and passed on within these relationships.¹ Second, Anderson ascribes values associated with American morality to the "decent" orientation.

By contrast, since thoroughly street-oriented youth have little in the way of parental guidance and support in the home, they come of age in accordance with the outlaw code. And, "at the heart of the code is the issue of respect—loosely defined as being treated 'right,' or granted the deference one deserves" (Anderson, 1994, p. 83). Urban youth, whether oriented predominantly toward "street" or "decent," learn at an early age that aggression and toughness earn respect among peers. Being able to handle affronts, verbally and physically, is a valuable skill on the streets. As such, one's capacity to "dis" others while not being "dissed" enhances one's reputation and self-image. Given the fact that many of our youth come of age in urban centers blighted with poverty and an educational system overwhelmed and underfunded, it sometimes follows that our kids see themselves as damaged or deficient. Therefore the street environment poses a dangerously exciting game; a kind of "ghetto-rama" where players are eager to "campaign for respect" (Anderson, 1994, p. 86). The dictum is clear: the greater one's ability to decipher and execute the street code, the greater one's self-worth.

For inner-city young males in particular, the street code not only structures their daily interactions with others who are also "campaigning for respect," but provides them with precarious rites of passage into "manhood" (Anderson, 1990, p. 165). There is a complex relationship among the acquisition of material possessions, the maintenance of "juice" or respect, and the concept of manhood. A street-oriented young man has a particularly heightened sense of the importance of self-presentation because the respect others give him is disproportionately based on whether others see him as a potential threat. That is, his bearing

and comportment in public are based on sending the undeniable message that he is not someone to be messed with.

To make matters more volatile, the assembly of expensive items for show enhances his juice. Jackets, sneakers, jewelry, cars, and women are treated as "trophies" (Anderson, 1994, p. 88) that demonstrate and create self-worth. As Ray Dog, of the Mighty RSO, says "[t]hat shit built up your self esteem" ("Reality check," 1994, p. 67). However, since to own it is to risk its loss, the flow of juice demands the defense of its wells. And therein lies the potentially deadly rub. For the more expensive the item, the more valuable the prize seems to another, the more likely he will be "stepped to" (confronted or challenged), the more frequent will be acts of physical violence and interpersonal crime. Since this brutal form of social intercourse is promoted and legitimized by the street code, his earnest participation in it already produces a certain amount of regard. In fact, his willingness to play the game signals his "readiness" for the street-coded manhood rituals. Meanwhile, those attempting to circumvent the code are judged as weak and are thus subject to attack precisely because they are viewed as easy prey.

Explicit in the dynamics of the street code is an award system for the unabashed use of aggression in lieu of diplomacy in social relations. Accordingly, a black male's "manhood" seems to rest on negotiating the combative terrain of the streets so as not to get "punked out," "beat down," or generally abused. Throw into this confrontational formula crack cocaine, gangs, and guns, and it is no wonder the black community is reeling from multiple blows delivered by its youthful citizenry and increasingly uncoupling from what some black and white leaders refer to as a "lost generation" (Vogel, 1994, p. 56). Paradoxically, Anderson and others adamantly argue that it is exactly the community "old heads" who must take a stand and initiate the young men into a more meaningful manhood, one steeped in the diverse and rich cultural history of family and black community ritual, rather than ruthless and rugged adventurism.

Given the unforgiving street orientation and its self-promoting norms, a generation of black youth left to find its own means of attaining selfhood has been accused of producing packs of "predators" who consume weaker or more "decent" youth to feed their voracious but delicate personae. Concomitantly, inner-city youth argue that running in gangs is an inevitable and necessary form of self-preservation. At a recent "gangsta rap summit," MC Eiht, formerly of Compton's Most Wanted, had this to say about the function and formation of gangs:

I couldn't see school. I couldn't see a job, I couldn't see moms, nobody. All I seen was the 'hood, the colors and I'm out there. I didn't give a fuck. Nigga put a strap [gun] in my hand. I had back [support] from about fifty niggas. So I didn't have to worry 'bout a nigga. All I had to do was throw on my khakis and my sweatshirt, put my rag in my back pocket and mothafuckas was intimidated by that shit.... ("Reality check," 1994, p. 67)

In any case, Anderson contends that the street-oriented black male is dissociated from the values corresponding to the traditional black family; he makes "the [street-coded] concept of manhood a part of his very identity, [but] he has difficulty manipulating it—it often controls him" (Anderson, 1994, p. 92). And it is precisely this sense of careening, intimidating public display that has alarmed civil authorities. "Ironically, this perceived dangerousness has become important to the public self-identity of many local black men." It is of special import that "[t]he public awareness is color-coded: white skin denotes civility, law-abidingness, and trustworthiness, while black skin is strongly associated with poverty, crime, incivility, and distrust" (Anderson, 1990, p. 168, p. 208).

With the mass production of gangsta rap and its massive array of detractors and supporters, with the public tribulation over violent street crime, the mounting concern over

abuse against women and children, and racial tensions strangling important public debate, you may wonder aloud while reading the next section of this essay whether or not the '70s funk group, War, was on to something when it announced "The World Is a Ghetto."

Consumerism Meets Gangsta-ism: The Selling of a Street Code and Shock Appeal

Undeniably one of the most meaningful accomplishments of gangsta artistry has been to open a window on the daily, gritty grind of inner-city living. The social dynamics of the 'hood were largely obscure to mainstream America until the protestations of hard-core hip hop in the mid to late 1980s. Artists like Ice-T, Schooly-D, and N.W.A. emerged from the hip hop underground with shocking and touching portrayals of life and death. Other performers such as The Geto Boys, Tupac Shakur, Too Short, Warren G., D.J. Quik, and Snoop Doggy Dogg began to take us on tours of their blighted neighborhoods, forcing us to witness a devastating procession of human roadkill. Gangsta artists relate to us stories about pimps, pushers, "niggas," "hoes," and "bitches," both real and imagined, who, like deer, are terrified and mesmerized by the dazzling headlights of oncoming perversion and mayhem.

In the 1980s, the West Coast quickly established itself as the center of foul-mouthed agitation, mainly through the music of N.W.A. On their first full-length album, *Straight Outta Compton*, the members of N.W.A., Easy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Yella, proudly announced that America was "now about to witness the power of street knowledge" (N.W.A., 1988). N.W.A. set the pace and the standard for gruesome and controversial passion on tracks like "Gangsta, Gangsta," where Ice Cube introduced himself as "a crazy mothafucka from around the way," and on "If It Ain't Ruff," where we came to know the troublesome and turbulent persona of MC Ren. Part of the significance of N.W.A. was that they realized that rebellious street norms could be exploited for economic gain and made to serve rhetorical ends. On "Parental Discretion Is Advized," N.W.A. warns us that there are necessarily some black issues and street-coded performances that will fall outside of mainstream America's comfortable understanding. Moreover, the promotion of the street code by America's political economy constitutes a conspiracy because it justifies the imposition of a form of marshal law in the ghetto. To punctuate this point, N.W.A. waves a defiant middle finger in the face of racist and oppressive social institutions on their infamous track, "Fuck Tha Police." In the song, a cop is dragged into "N.W.A. court," tried and "found guilty of bein' a red-neck, white-bred, chicken-shit mothafucker ..."² As Ice Cube explained in a later interview, "[i]t's like fuck Uncle Sam. We just narrowed it down to the police. Because the black kid out there don't give a fuck about who's mayor or who's governor or who's the president ... the police is the government in the ghetto" (Baraka, 1991, p. 33).

Having confirmed the financial viability of a hard-core street aesthetic (*Straight Outta Compton* sold 2 million copies), N.W.A., along with the self-proclaimed "Original Gangster," Ice-T, helped set in motion an impulse to describe and manipulate the horrors of the "United States Ghetto" ("Reality check," 1994, p. 70). Thus, artists began articulating a chaotic world where young urban males, locked in the grip of an unrelenting and unrepentant street code, are pressured to become what Compton's Most Wanted referred to as "trigger happy niggas" who are "ready for the apocalypse. ..." (Ice Cube, 1992). Ice Cube (1990, 1992) seems thoroughly prepared for self-destruction when he speaks of "genocide" on "Endangered Species," and on "Now I Gotta Wet 'Cha" relishes the murders of those he views as doing him wrong: "Now wet mothafuckas all bloody 'cause a bullet will mold yo ass like silly putty ... comin' out yo back, Mr. Mack / now they got your guts in a sack. ..." Similarly, Ice-T (1991a) gives this account of where he's from: "I'm from South Central, fool, where anything goes / snatch you out of your car so fast you get whiplash ... gang-bangers don't carry no switch blades / every kid's got a tech-nine or hand grenade / 37 killed last week in a crack war / hostages tied

up and shot in a liquor store / nobody gives a fuck ...” Note the Geto Boys’ classic trip into the deranged psychosis of a paranoid psychopath:

Thinkin’ I got to fuck somebody before the weekend / the sight of blood excites me / shoot you in the head, sit down and watch you bleed to death / I hear the sound of your last breath / shouldn’t have been around, I went all the way left / you was in the right place with me at the wrong time I’m a psychopath in a minute, lose my fuckin’ mind. . . . (Geto Boys, 1989)

Musical artists dramatizing the street code depict violent confrontation as a black ghetto norm, present misogyny as an organizing principle of sexual relations, and equate this mentality with mental illness. Underlying this characterization of the street code is the assumption that hip hop’s so-called social pathologies are derived from America’s ills. Despite the belief by legislators, politicians, and black community leaders that the civil rights movement secured human dignity for African Americans, gangsta rap artists maintain that those social institutions designed to promote human dignity and preserve civil order actually contributed to the reinforcement of the street code. Ice Cube (1990) strongly concurs with this assessment and offers a tremendous description of this process on the track, “The Product.” In this song, Ice Cube highlights the role that prison plays in hardening an already rigid street code. Similarly, Snoop Doggy Dogg, premiering on Dr. Dre’s (1992) first solo effort, laments in the song “Li’l Ghetto Boy,” that “I spent four years in the county [jail] with nothin’ but convicts around me / but now I’m back at the pound and we expose ways for the youth to survive / some think it’s wrong, but we tend to think it’s right. . . .” Also, Tupac Shakur (1993) alludes to the manufacture of an oppressive selfhood on “Keep Ya Head Up,” when he remarks that “I was give [*sic*] this world, I didn’t make it. . . .”

Interestingly, in this song ostensibly dedicated to bolstering the spirits of black urban women, Tupac Shakur also identifies what is arguably the production line for much of the misogynistic tendencies in hard-core hip hop. Recall that Anderson contends that the street etiquette validates the objectification of women in terms of their potential sexual and “juice” values, and in the process discredits the historical and cultural significance of black womanhood (Anderson, 1990). In song after song, black women are assumed to be “skeezers” or “hoodratz” (*Compton’s Most Wanted*, 1992). And so, a street-oriented young man may view a woman as a pawn to be played in the larger chess game for respect. The “ownership” of an attractive young woman builds a young man’s self-esteem in a way similar to the donning of a fresh, new pair of Air Jordans. But, since the development of genuine affection is discouraged by the street credo of acquisition, this social-exchange dynamic encourages female abuse. Therefore, it is ironic that as Tupac raps for the elevation of women, in tracks like “I Get Around” he relies on the very code that compels him to put them down. In gangsta artistry, women are routinely referred to as “hoes” and “bitches” who justify their degradation by scheming against men, using sex as a lure for financial gain. The population of artists who frequently represent women in this manner is too large to characterize fully here, but N.W.A.’s (1991) “One Less Bitch” serves as a prime example:

In reality, a fool is one who believes that all women are ladies / A nigga is one who believes that all ladies are bitches / And all bitches are created equal / to me, all bitches are the same / money-hungry, scandalous groupie hoess! / that’s always ridin’ on a nigga’s dick / always in a nigga’s pocket / and when a nigga runs outta money, the bitch is gone in the wind / to me, all bitches ain’t shit. . . .

Easy E’s (Eric Wright) misogynistic protestations can be profitably exploited by more than just a mass-marketed culture industry. If we listen carefully, we can discern how N.W.A. glee-

fully acknowledge participation in their self-promotion as “niggas” who condemn women by limiting their self-realization to the status of “bitches” and “hoes” in a perverse dramatization of street-oriented relations. Not only is manhood mutated into “nigger-hood,” and the black female mystique twisted into prostitution, but N.W.A. suggest that their caricatures should be taken as such. That is, they consistently hint that their “raging erections” (Reynolds, 1991, p. 27) display what Nelson George (1992, p. 156) calls “cartoon machismo,” a commercialized spectacle designed to thrust the street code through the doors of corporate boardrooms.

As “maniacs” and “lunatics” stalk our city streets, as car-jackers murder tourists for the keys to rental cars, and as this mayhem is sampled and shipped to record stores so that the marketers of the shameless are “once again beatin’ on your mothafuckin’ eardrums” (N.W.A., 1991), we find ourselves doing an absurd kind of public dance, both retreating and advancing to the frenzied cadence of spectacular consumption. Long gone are the days of wine and roses and whimsical waltzes in New York City’s Central Park. Now we participate in a media-orchestrated bump-and-grind—a wild “wilding” where our social sensibilities are gang raped (Baker, 1993). This spectacle makes for great TV because consumers love to talk about hating to eat it (Hughes, 1993), and since the intensity of the pleasure of perverse consumption is directly related to our gross diet, we want nastier stuff to digest. Indeed, Americans can’t seem to get enough of this commercial indigestion because somehow we all sense that there is an essential void we need to fill.

As we peer down the dark and frequently dangerous streets of our urban communities, the sense of a psychological abyss can overwhelm us. Listen to Elijah Anderson’s voice as it echoes softly into that openness:

Simply living in such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior. Although there are often forces in the community which can counteract the negative influences . . . the despair is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture . . . [t]his hard reality can be traced to the profound sense of alienation from mainstream society and its institutions felt by many poor inner-city black people, particularly the young. The code of the streets is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith. . . . (Anderson, 1994, pp. 81–82)

And so perhaps the “young and the ruthless” show symptoms of social heresy because they suffer from a kind of dis-ease transmitted by “[l]iving in a post-industrial, Reagan-molded, increasingly-racist, anti-immigrant, less tolerant, more sexist, Jesse-dissing, King-beating, Quayle-spelling, Clarence Thomas-serving America. . . .” (Lusane, 1992, p. 37). It is hardly surprising that, given the apparent loss of hope in urban America, hard-core rap would be center stage in the searing debate about how to save our children (Saunders, 1994).

As generational wisdom and black-folk beliefs fall into the gulf separating the “old heads” and the “young bloods,” historical, cultural discontinuity is displayed through acts of mutual cynicism. Reporting on an interview with the President of the National Political Congress of Black Women, Kiarna Dawsey makes this disturbing observation: “Although some of us will, it’s a little scary that Dr. [Dolores] Tucker would assume that Snoop Doggy Dogg, or me for that matter, cares that she marched with King . . . [a]t this very moment, the gap between the generations in Black America is as wide as the Sahara. ‘Kids have it better today,’ she tells me. Really?” (Dawsey, 1994, pp. 58–59). As lessons learned through a “street” orientation seemingly take the place of black-folk lifestyles inscribed within a “decent” orientation, and as “music in the combat zone” (Pareles, 1990) irritates the antagonism between the two worldviews, cultural critics of diverse ideological hues are looking toward the heavens for spiritual guidance regarding the “hole in our soul.”

Using the “down-home” idiom that rebukes a philistine-like, anti-blues, dead aesthetic,

Martha Bayles (1994, pp. 3–4), in *Hole in Our Soul*, documents the tailspin that popular culture has endured since the rebellious, yet devoted '60s generation. Bayles traces the evolution of the black folk spiritual through the blues and jazz factions to what she perceives as the decadence of today's pop music scene. Of particular importance is the manner in which Bayles demonstrates the joint influences of a peculiarly American aesthetic and an overblown consumer economy on pop music and on black artistry.

This Harvard graduate provides a comprehensive account of African New World music and details its trials and tribulations as it participates in a conscious effort at cultural reclamation. She takes Theodor Adorno to task for not really understanding the psychical motivations of jazz and, after negotiating the diverse ideological terrain of modernity, she arrives at the threshold of "postmodernity," which is when she claims nearly all things go wrong for art. Instead of the triumph of postmodernity over modernity, the victory of popular culture over "high" culture, Bayles contends that at least some strains of postmodernism are fetid achievements of "perverse modernism" over modernism. Moreover, Bayles (1994, p. 387) believes that perverse modernism exhibits the ability of a Western "civilization" to champion an aesthetic that seeks, as its guiding principle, to destroy the idea of morality as such. By this she means that despite postmodernity's claims of a liberating aesthetic, one that blurs distinctions so as to undermine oppressive forms of elitism, Bayles argues that perverse modernism thrives by promoting the myth that there is no "good" (read "moral") art. Ensnared in this myth is the conception that the vulgar subverts elitism and that the masses can celebrate their common experiences through the cultural reproduction of the mundane. Since this move also eliminates the restrictions that morality used to place on art through the dictates of "fine taste," it follows that the baser, more "obscene" the artifact, the more palatable its form for mass consumption.

At this point, perverse modernism is prepared to pounce and capitalize on the seediest forms of cultural expression, with the skillful support of some culture industry brokers. For Bayles (1994, p. 345), gangsta rap answers the call for self-perversion because it caters to its own lowest common denominator. By obscuring the fact that some "popular" music can also be "good" in terms of decency and morality, perverse modernism provokes a jubilee wherein patrons feast on the vile and vicious, at the same time provoking the awkward question, what is *really* what?

I want to be careful here because this question cannot be answered simply by saying that art imitates life, or that the music is just entertainment (Jones, 1993), or that rappers talk "the real shit" (Secter, 1991, p. 24). What we need to do at least is to delve into the interstices of popular cultural production. The battle lines in the debate over whether or not hard-core rap possesses insightful commentary or seeks to merely shock and incite are nearly as blurry as the lines between art and life itself in post-industrial American entertainment (Hughes, 1993). But we need to understand that this is only part of the scenario. By linking rap theatrics with punk and heavy metal imagery, Bayles paints a larger picture that includes the accusation that a European Anglocized aesthetic strategy fosters the perverted turn for youthful desire. The fact that black art has historically performed at the core of a white pleasure principle leads this critic to the poignant, yet overly determined conception that the insatiable hunger of predominantly white youth dictates the flow of "aggressive noise dominated [*sic*] sound; obscene violent lyrics; and emotions ranging from sadistic lust to nihilistic rage" (Bayles, 1994, p. 342). In sum, Bayles (1994) puts her point this way: "As we've seen, obscenity is the preferred weapon of those willing to do anything to get a rise out of the public. The faces are black, but the strategy is *European*: seek out a submerged anti-social custom that is considered marginal even by its participants, drag it kicking and screaming to the surface, and celebrate it as 'art'" (p. 352, my emphasis).

The fact that so-called gangsta rap narratives are complex collages of social proclamations

booming out of previously muffled throats—angry, confused, frustrated voices speaking from what Robin D.G. Kelley (1992) calls the "social and spatial fringes" of our society—is a precious one. Lest we forget: the Geto Boys' Robert Shaw, a.k.a. Bushwick Bill, was actually shot in the head during a suicidal tirade (DeCurtis, 1991); 22-year-old Calvin Broadus did roll with the Long Beach Insane Crips before his album *Doggystyle* went multi-platinum and before he was charged with and tried for murder (Wilson, 1994; "Witnessess," 1995); the handsome and charismatic Tupac Shakur couldn't learn important lessons about becoming a man at home (Powell, 1994), and so he gleaned them from the street code pervasive in Marin City, California, and was charged with assaulting a limousine driver and shooting two off-duty Atlanta police officers, was convicted of sodomizing a fan in his hotel room and was recently murdered during a drive-by shooting ("Three rap sheets," 1995). Similarly, Chris Wallace, a.k.a. The Notorious B.I.G., was gunned down outside a Los Angeles night club (Kinnon, 1997); the 2-year-old son of the Wu-Tang Clan's, U-God, was critically injured in a Staten Island drive-by (Alexander, 1994); and the very real brilliance of Dr. Dre cannot excuse the fact that he man-handled the female host of a rap video show because he reportedly felt he was dissed on the air ("Microphone check," 1991).

My point is not simply that these artists exemplify a "street" orientation in their artistry and in their lives, but that there exists a spectacularly symbiotic relationship between the dictates of the street code and an energetic American consumerism. It looks somewhat like this: Taking Elijah Anderson at his word, we appreciate the manner in which the street code legitimates aggression in the pursuit of juice and manifests it in material possession. As rap artists graphically explore this reality, the processes of spectacular consumption become vivid. Gangsta rap artistry vivifies harsh imagery and its consumption establishes a set of exchange relations among public culture, rap music, and the rap industrial complex.³ Moreover, these exchange relations legitimate themselves by pointing to increased market consumption and by increasing the status of some of its more talented spokespersons. For example, *Time* magazine asserted that N.W.A. climbed to No. 1 by "bearing down as hard as it always had," and by not selling out (Cocks, 1991, p. 78). Similarly, *The New York Times* suggested that "market research had shown demand for harsher lyrics," and so Rap-A-Lot records urged the Geto Boys to go insane (Pareles, 1990, p. 29). Therefore, as the street code gets explosively commodified and artists get juiced beyond their maddest dreams, they are compelled to maintain their celebrity status by "authenticating" their self-presentations in increasingly grittier street terms. And as rappers scramble to position themselves beyond the range of the kind of humiliating parody that 3rd Bass leveled at Vanilla Ice in their video, "Pop Goes the Weasel," their magnified rage and profiteering gets portrayed as the way it really is—everywhere. What this also means is that artists, encouraged to display the ferocity of street knowledge on and offstage, perform outrageous and seamless characters. The Harvard-trained former editor of *The Source* gives us this illuminating piece of reporting: "When N.W.A. hit No. 1, mainstream America was dumbfounded." "*People* magazine wanted to catch the group casually at home, sitting on their couch and smiling," a spokesperson from Priority told us. "I tried to explain to some 40-year-old white woman that they don't sit on their couch and smile. They're gangsters for God's sake" (Secter, 1991, p. 24). And so it would seem that Guy Debord (1983) was incisive when he argued that the "spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation mediated by images" (p. 4).

Undeniably there are those young men who have so thoroughly internalized the street code that, if they were not clever or talented artists, they would have a hard time putting the "street" orientation aside long enough to get through a standard job interview, but this issue only grazes the point. The hyper-reality and hyperbole of gangsta rap is constitutive of dynamic exchange relationships that make moot nearly all discussions of what is "real." If Snoop Doggy Dogg can appear on the Fox network with a harem of "trophies," boast about how he doesn't

"love 'dem hoes" on the now-expired *Arsenio Hall Show*, roll through Long Beach and choose among many adoring fans while keeping a watchful eye out for Bloods or others who are just itching to "step to" the star (Hampton, 1993), what's the point of bickering about a distinction between fact and fiction?

Todd Shaw's argument that "Too Short" is a character and that he is a "businessman" who isn't "brainwashed by the shit I sing" (Dennis, 1992) has merit, but it doesn't resolve this dilemma. American popular culture is today constitutive of the vigorous exchange relations of spectacular consumption—an intensely overblown interactive consumer network where some black (and white) folk gladly sell their "souls" for a thrill ride toward ultimate juice and "manhood." Meanwhile, on the streets of the "United States Ghetto" rap artistry is celebrated as the profit-making industry that it most assuredly is and hailed for allowing brothers and sisters in the 'hood to share in the dissing of society's repressive institutions and leadership. In short, many hip hop enthusiasts are so because they get a chance to make something out of nothing, to participate in the transposition of poverty into profit by "punking out" America. And so, perhaps it's more meaningful to say that gangsta rap is neither fact, fiction nor some exotic combination, but part of an *overdose of commercialized reality*; that it constitutes some of the ugly and obscene excesses of pop culture and is constitutive of the mess we've gotten ourselves into; that it poses as death-on-a-stick, a low-fat, low-calorie poison that is sure to satisfy anyone's "appetite for destruction."

Part of the explanation resides in the fact that consumerism is in the midst of symbolically reproducing the street code, commodifying it in the form of an easy-to-open package of hip (Lacayo, 1994). This awesome replication and consumption of street-coded imagery is significant precisely because the processes of spectacular consumption are implicated not only in the validation of what becomes reasonable street protocol, but also in the promotion of strategies that can get anyone "jocked" by an entire MTV generation. And although I share Jonathan Alter's (1993) pained query, "How did we get to a point where 'art' became a code word for money?" (p. 67), there is a bit more at stake here than a requiem for a Platonic idealism in music.

For all the strengths of *Hole in Our Soul*, Bayles, in my opinion, not only overstates her case for perversion, but badly misreads the righteously imaginative funk of George Clinton and the political protestations of Chuck D. Part of the problem is that she treats rap discourse in precisely the same terms as holistic cultural movements. In truth, she doesn't engage rap as discourse at all, but understands it as the static feedback from the electrified colloquy of mass consumerism. And as piercing and insightful as she is when discussing our perverted "hole," she overlooks the fragments, traces, or momentary utterances of "soul" found in the ruptured speech of rappers like Ice-T and KRS-One. For example, Bayles (1994) derides KRS-One, of Boogie Down Productions, for his gangsta-style message on their debut album, *Criminal Minded*, and, therefore, backhandedly dismisses subsequent releases with the clipped retort, "[b]ut it was too late" (p. 353). Too late for what? In a single stroke, Bayles reveals a cultivated prejudice not only against hard-core rap, but against the recuperative energies of rhetoric. As a social production, the marketed articulations of the street code provoke idioms that speak synecdochically in our behalf. As such, they are vast and vital representations of our lost-and-found cultures and histories. Bayles exerts great energy describing gangsta rap's menacing "noise," but has very little sense of its evocative and provocative features; that is, the myriad ways in which rap performance invents life-affirming possibilities for "making ends." Perhaps, therefore, it is not surprising that this critic does not actively engage in the act of criticism.

With this said, the final section of this essay critiques the discursive competition between distinct rhetorical norms of black communal tradition, illuminating what counts as a reasonable lifestyle. Through a textual analysis of a selected rap text, I will demonstrate how the rhetorical resources of both the "decent" and "street" orientations constitute an important

dialectical relationship in gangsta rap narrative. I will argue that this dialectic provides resistance against consuming impulses through inquiries into and assertions of strategic means for transfiguring urban livelihood.

The Street Hustler's Spectacular Paradox

Before both the "Cop Killer" controversy and the Warner Brothers split with Ice-T over "creative differences" (*USA Today*, 1993, p. D2), the motion picture *New Jack City* propelled the former gang member-turned-rapper into movie stardom. The successful soundtrack of the same name contained a virulent trek into the mind of gangsta. In "New Jack Hustler," Ice-T participates in a perverse spectacle in which the Hustler is consumed by a street-provoked obsession with materialism and consumes others with a voracious street-coded persona. By this I mean that the Hustler's identity is constituted through a near-seamless rapport with a street code composed of a consumer-dominated rationality. In the text, a commodified street code encourages the kind of behavior that translates into ghettoized profit and power.

Hustler! / word, I pull the trigger long / grit my teeth, spray 'till every nigga's gone / got my block / sewn up my dope spot / last thing I sweat, some sucka punk cop / move like a king when I road hop / you try to flex, bang! / another nigga drop / you gotta deal with this 'cause ain't no way out / why? / cash money ain't never gonna play out / I got nothin' to lose, much to gain / in my brain I gotta capitalist migraine / I gotta get paid tonight, you mothafuckin' right / pickin' my grip, check my bitch, keep my game tight. . . . (Ice-T, 1991a)

From the outset the Hustler surveys his kingdom and metes out brutal forms of territorial control. When a dispute arises the challenger is violently dismissed. If we inspect the warrant supporting the Hustler's authority, we understand that it is defined in correspondence with a kind of virtual reality where aggressive norms are legitimized by a profit-oriented street code (ain't no way out . . . cash money ain't never gonna play out). The fact that the Hustler feels as if he has "nothin' to lose" suggests the important point that he is apparently detached from a worldview that instills a sense of immanent self-worth based on communal forms of support and guidance. In this brief excerpt, we begin to understand how a Hustler views the conditions in which his selfhood is constituted.

So many hoes on my jock, think I'm a movie star / nineteen, I gotta \$50,000 car / go ta school? / I ain't goin' for it / kiss my ass / bust the cap on the Moet / 'cause I don't wanna hear that crap / Why? I'd rather be a new jack hustler. . . .

The beginning of an enormous tension is revealed to us here. A traditionally stable form of initiation into social values and "manhood," the educational system, gets summarily dismissed in favor of a street-coded market consumption. Listen to this same rationale in an interview with MC Eiht: "If you gave a child an option, you can hang on the streets, sell dope, have the cars, the bitches or you can go to school eight hours a day, come home, can't go outside, go to church. You tell me which one you gonna pick? I'm going for the streets goddammit" ("Reality check," 1994, p. 74). Eiht's comment illustrates the notion that the "decency" orientation garners none of the precious commodity of juice for urban youth. Moreover, women are treated as "hoes" and "bitches" precisely because the Hustler views all community relations through a prism of street-jaded consumerism. These degrading labels signal women's status and value in a seemingly exigent materialistic hierarchy. But also notice that women are *jocking him* because of his enhanced status as trophy. The terms for this distorted social structure are, as Anderson points out, provided by a reckless "street" orientation that

undermines traditional black folk sources of authority. In effect, then, the Hustler, in describing his justification for his way of life, clarifies the conditions for the development of his self-image.

This conception of nihilistic bravado, absurdly framed by an illusion of invincibility, begins to crack open, however, to reveal the inner chambers of the Hustler's psyche.

What's up, you say you wanna be down? / ease back, a mothafucka get beat down / out my face, fool / I'm the illest / bullet proof / I die harder than Bruce Willis / got my crew in effect, I bought a new Jag / so much cash gotta keep it in Hefty bags / all I think about is t's and g's / imagine that, me workin' in Mickey D's / that's a joke 'cause I'm never gonna be broke / when I die it'll be bullets and gunsmoke / you don't like my lifestyle? / fuck you! / I'm rollin' with the new jack crew / and I'm a hustler. ...

With this latest turn we can see how the Hustler's social identity seems manufactured by Guy Debord's splendid machinery. The Hustler defines himself in terms brokered by an orientation that replicates humanity as commodity. Thus, it is easy to understand why to be broke is a fate worse than death ("never gonna be broke ... bullets and gunsmoke"). Since the Hustler's being is constituted through the pressures of a street code, and since it seems to be a foregone conclusion that one will meet with some kind of untimely death in the ghetto (Foster, 1994), poverty represents a kind of living nothingness. In a moving way, then, gangsta rap articulates an important perspective on the sad stasis of discharged personhood—the cultivated refusal by a cannibalistic consumer society to own up to its inability to meet its fabulous promises for livelihood. And so, the Hustler is a spectacular facade whose public performances both refute and sustain his status as a glamorous image. Debord (1983, p. 12) reminds us that this paradox is integral to the spectacle because one's brilliant *appearance* conceals the contradiction.

Here I come, so you better break north / as I stride my gold chains glide back and forth / I care nothin' 'bout you, and that's evident / all I love is my dope and dead presidents / sound crazy? well it isn't / the ends justifies the means, that's the system / learned that in school, then I dropped out / hit the streets, checked the grip, and now I got clout / I had nothin' and I wanted it / you had everything and you flaunted it / turned the needy into the greedy / with cocaine my success came speedy. ...

The Hustler seems systematically trained for brutality. The ends-means rationale he references is not only influential in his production as a trophy, it binds him to the street orientation. The Hustler demonstrates an utter lack of consideration for the welfare of anyone. Not only does he allude to the prominence of degenerate consumption ("you had everything"), he internalizes the distorted lesson ("learned that in school") and executes its systems logic with cold efficiency ("with cocaine my success came speedy"). Importantly, notice how the glare of the spectacle ("you *flaunted* it") illuminates one potential set of strategies, while overshadowing alternative schemes constitutive of "decent" black communal processes. Materialism is presented here as everything that determines the Hustler's identity.

Got me twisted, jammed into a paradox / every dollar I get another brother drop / Maybe that's the plan and I don't understand / Goddamn! / you got me sinkin' in quicksand / but since I don't know ain't never learned / I gotta get paid / I got money to earn / with my posse out on the ave, buck my sounds, crack a forty and laugh / cool out and watch my new Benz gleam / is this a nightmare or the American dream?

What we witness here is a kind of textual revelation (revolution?). Formerly, the Hustler only understood his social world in terms of a rigidly enforced mentality of street consumption. But here the Hustler briefly reconsiders his behavior from a different standpoint. The idea that his rampaging impulses may have been constituted through a devastating alliance between perverse materialism and a ruthless street ethic virtually flickers before his eyes. But, his overdetermined selfhood rationalizes the potential insight away.

By examining both the pragmatic and symbolic modes of production for the street code we find a social structure that emerges out of harsh economic despair. Also, by understanding that the code valorizes the campaign for respect and manhood in terms of the brutal acquisition of material goods, we can appreciate that in the absence of black folk values and cultural ritual, black personhood under these conditions can be constituted as "thug life" (Powell, 1994, p. 37). The Hustler's tale dramatizes the (near) triumph of street nihilism and individualism over the social responsibility traditionally embraced and celebrated by a vital black community. In other words, the Hustler is blinded by the glare of materialism, constitutes his social identity in accordance with the street code, and actualizes his self-worth as an objectified street agent by objectifying others; that is, by blinding others with the oppressive glare of his materialistic presence.⁴ And, "maybe that's the plan. ..."

The rupture that the dialectic of the street/decent orientations creates in the text is fantastic. For an instant the Hustler re-orient his perception in terms of previously unrecognized values constitutive of black community (another *brother*—not nigga—drop) and vaguely apprehends the outlines of potential "genocidal catastrophe. ... " This dramatic shift in perspective is important in understanding that the competing rhetorical resources of the "street" and "decent" orientations destabilize the normativity of *both* orientations in the text. Jeffrey Louis Decker (1990) provides a valuable discussion of the symbolic process of dominance and subversion in *The Interpretation of American Dreams: The Political Unconscious in American Literature and Culture*. In brief, Decker argues that the meta-narrative of the American Dream denies harsh realities, while making poetic arguments on behalf of materialism. Put another way, the American Dream, as an endearing and enduring literary trope or ideograph, provides mythic justification for spectacular consumption. This is accomplished, says Decker (1990), because the American Dream demonstrates a mode of self-promotion fueled by a fictionalized "ideal of possibility" (p. 3) if you do the right thing. Gangsta rap disputes and sustains this warrant by drawing upon competing lifestyle codes as its chief rhetorical resources. And so, as Decker points out that there are other ways of dreaming, gangsta rap provides conflicted and contradictory testimony for the American Dream.

While "cooling out," the Hustler's insight into the absurd and unreasonable constitution of the American Dream is nearly blotted out by the gleam of a trophy of the Dream—the "new Benz." But the Hustler tacitly knows that the answer to his question, "Is this a nightmare or the American Dream?" must be *yes to both*. The Hustler's nightmare is exposed in a horrific collage of some of the sights and sounds of ghetto life:

So think twice if you comin' down my block / you wanna journey through hell? / well shit gets hot / pregnant teens, children scream / life is weighed on the scales of a triple beam / you don't come here much and you better not / wrong move—bang—ambulance, cops / I gotta get more money than you got / so what if some mothafucka gets shot. ...

That's how the game is played, another brother slain / the wound is deep but they givin' us a bandaid / my education's low, but I got long dough / I'm raised like a pitbull, my heart pumps nitro / sleep on silk, lie like a politician / my uzi's my best friend, cold as a mortician / lock me up, it's genocidal catastrophe / there'll be another one after me. ...

The psychical struggle the Hustler experiences here is remarkable. The dialectical perspective allows him to see the nightmare *despite* the brilliance of the Dream. This paradoxical image is produced by the conflicting rhetorical demands placed on the discourse by the “street” and “decent” orientations. Viewed in this way, the Hustler’s tale is about how social economic processes bolstered by the American Dream and encoded in the materialistic aspect of street relations conceal nightmarish effects. Indeed, the “decent” orientation provokes the reference to a history of oppression as well as the speculation about forms of abuse (“with cocaine . . . education’s low . . . raised like a pitbull”). However, this resistant space is always susceptible to the dictates of a street code that, through market impulses, becomes virtually constabular with realizing the American Dream. And so, in these final sections of this track, the Hustler partially recognizes the terms of his subjection, but continues to participate in it.

This precarious positioning is also evident if we emerge from the textual world of the “Hustler” and confront Tracy Marrow’s (Ice-T) rap artistry. “New Jack Hustler” is a conflicted narrative because Ice-T uses a dialectical lens as a kind of refractory tool; he bends visions of reality so as to both blend and distinguish arguments justifying aggressive acquisition and the communal life it threatens. Ice-T (1991b) performs a similar maneuver in “Original Gangster,” where he raps “for the brothers just like myself / dazed by the game and the quest for extreme wealth. . . .” In this way, Ice-T constitutes an important confrontation of worldviews. Ice-T’s comments on being imprisoned in the “jungle” reveal a source of destabilization for meaning: “The greatest tragedy in the ghetto is watching people become accustomed to the prospect of a bleak future. . . . I see the frustrations of this mind-set so clearly; I’m basically a product of it” (Marrow & Siegmund, 1994, p. 13). However, if this is so, then, gangsta rap’s use of the “street” orientation allows for economic *possibility* while the “decent” orientation is constitutive of *impossibility*. Or, is it the other way around?

Conclusions

Yes, the Hustler is ultimately consumed by his own spectacle. However, the final line of the song, “there’ll be another one after me,” compels a fundamental question: What kind of social knowledge will emerge next? A hustler’s? This question, in turn, maintains the destabilizing energy of the text. This is so because a critical audience is invited to further question and intervene in the commercial reproduction of social identity and knowledge (Rasmussen & Downey, 1991). We are shown a particular perspective on making a living in post-industrial America and on the flaws of strategies distinguished by individuation and profit.

Having made his name (not to mention his money) in hip hop, Ice-T represents some of the best and worst of perverse consumerism. His successes demonstrate the effectiveness of a rap discursive strategy that disrupts the strict polarity of the “street” and “decent” orientations. While his compelling brand of public discourse supports the mass appeal of the “street” orientation, his interrogation of *what it means to be successful* provides for moments of critical reflection. Indeed, these moments are crucial for it seems as though in order for gangsta rap to maintain its popularity, it increasingly has to submit to a form of tragic humiliation: The influence of market consumption on rap artistry is patently denied by the oft-repeated assertion of street authenticity. This refutation not only obscures corporate power, but it reifies a dangerous social equation. As rappers depict themselves as prowling “niggas,” their popularity, as I mentioned before, relies on their “authenticating” these performances. And so black manhood is degraded within the dynamic interstitiality of “ghettonomics.” This symbiosis among street dictates and market strategy is both revealed and strengthened by the gangsta artist’s spectacular presence. However, for this dialectic to fulfill itself, it must do more than provoke talk about poverty and crime and how brothers are stuck in a market-induced dilemma. It must do more than mediate argumentative tensions through the imagery of despair and mate-

rial deliverance. It must broker the articulation of the conditions under which an orientation can be rebuked, revised, or rejected.

To achieve this understanding, I contend that critics need to pay more attention to the terms of exchange and interaction among cultural performances, regulatory institutions, and the contours of our public culture. We must carefully assess the modes of transference and redefinition invented by and invested in speech performances. The areas, or “venues,” occupied by these performances are, as Thomas Farrell (1993, pp. 284–285) elucidates, powerfully conflicted to the extent that the normative constraints exerted upon discourse can be called into question by interested others. It is this participatory stake that gives rise to the forms of rhetorical recuperation and transformation that Bayles dismisses. Surveying the ground of this stake allows critics to recognize, for example, how so-called gangsta rap narratives are colonized by strategic interests of culture industry, are constitutive of the unique and crucial interests of urban youth, and are re-inscribing the rules of a spectacular game (Roberts, 1995). In order to reflect upon, to question, the features and forms of spectacular consumption (the exhibition and exchange of bodies, assaults, sex, drugs, and treasures) critics need to become acquainted with the “performance conditions” of various realms (McKerrow, 1990, p. 24). To do so our epistemologies will need to resemble organic relations among diverse social practices. They could extend from within a kind of nexus where rhetoric benefits from anthropology, argument from aesthetics, and economics from semiotics. Framing the matter differently, my analysis clarifies the fact that it has become increasingly difficult to assess the character of conflicted, mediated cultural performances precisely because they cohabit in multiple social spheres at once. It is also increasingly pressing that we do so.

Notes

1. Anderson (1990, 1994) is not suggesting that institutions like the African American church and school systems have no important role in this process, only that they are, or ideally should be, secondary to traditional and non-traditional family structures.
2. This inflammatory track provoked an equally incendiary letter of protest by the FBI.
3. These exchange relations can be powerfully binding. Following the death of Tupac Shakur, the now jailed CEO of Death Row Records, Marion “Suge” Knight, told a reporter that he doesn’t want “to give up gangsta rap, not at all. It is the real shit. It’s not about us [record executives]. It’s about the community; it’s about our people, and we can’t turn our backs on them.” Not to mention the \$100 million the record label earned in 1996 (Farley, 1996, p. 70).
4. This model was dramatized by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five more than 15 years ago. As one of the first rap groups to explicitly discuss the root causes of living conditions in the ghetto, their song, “The Message,” lamented that “a child is born with no state of mind / blind to the ways of mankind the places you’ll stay and where you’ll play looks like one big alleyway / you’ll admire all the number book takers, thugs, pimps, and pushers, and big money makers / drivin’ big cars, spendin’ 20s and 10s / and you’ll wanna grow up to be just like them!” (Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, 1992, p. 152).

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