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Author(s): CHARIS E. KUBRIN

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Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music

CHARIS E. KUBRIN, *George Washington University*

Recent research on identity, culture, and violence in inner-city communities describes a black youth culture, or street code, that influences adolescent behavior, particularly violent behavior. I build upon such literature through analysis of gangsta rap music, exploring how the street code is present not only in "the street," but also in rap music. I first consider how structural conditions in inner-city communities have given rise to cultural adaptations embodied in a street code. These adaptations help to create an interpretive environment where violence is accountable, if not normative. I then examine the complex, reflexive relationship between the street code, rap music, and social identity. These issues are examined through content analysis of 403 songs on rap albums from 1992 to 2000. Portrayals of violence in the lyrics serve many functions including establishing social identity and reputation and exerting social control: these are the central topics of the analysis.

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of sociological research on identity, culture, and violence in inner-city black communities (Anderson 1999; Bruce, Roscigno, and McCall 1998; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Kubrin and Wadsworth 2003; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Sampson and Wilson 1995). This work portrays a black youth culture or "street code" that influences the identity and behavior of residents, particularly with respect to violence. Typically ethnographic in nature, this literature describes how the code supplies compelling elements of local culture, a culture of the streets in which violence is rendered accountable and even normative.

One complementary medium for studying these issues that has not been fully exploited is rap music, a genre consistently noted for its focus on masculinity, crime, and violence. An aspect of hip-hop culture (Guevara 1996:50; Kelley 1996:117; Keyes 2002:1; Krims 2000:12), rap is "a musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack" (Keyes 2002:1). Rap emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods, ostensibly as a reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban black youth. When the genre first appeared in the 1970s, critics predicted a quick demise, but rap music flourished and has reshaped the terrain of American popular culture.

Rap music has undergone major transformations in the last two decades. One of the most significant occurred in the early 1990s with the emergence of "gangsta rap." *The St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* identifies gangsta rap as the most controversial type of rap music, having received global attention for "its vivid sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic lyrics, as well as its violent depiction of urban ghetto life in America" (Abrams 2000:198). Its roots can be traced to early depictions of the hustler lifestyle and blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, which glorified blacks as criminals, pimps, pushers, prostitutes, and gangsters. Mainly associated with West Coast artists (Keyes 2002:4), gangsta rap is considered a product of the

The author wishes to thank Ami Lynch for research assistance and Jim Holstein, Tim Wadsworth, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. Direct correspondence to: Charis E. Kubrin, Department of Sociology, George Washington University, Phillips Hall 409, 801 22nd St. N.W., Washington, DC 20052. E-mail: charisk@gwu.edu.

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gang culture and street wars of South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and Long Beach, and the resurgence of the retromack culture (pimp attitude and style) of East Oakland (Perkins 1996:18). Since its early pioneers were gang members, gangsta rap relates to the life experiences of the rappers themselves, and its lyrics portray gang and ghetto life from a criminal's perspective (Krims 2000:70).

Gangsta rap departed from earlier rap forms, which were often characterized as socially conscious and more politically Afro-centric (Keyes 2002:88, 158–59; Martinez 1997; Perkins 1996:19). Even today, gangsta rap differs from other types of rap mainly in that it is the musical expression of ghetto centrality, an expression that engages the “black youth cultural imagination that cultivated varying ways of interpreting, representing, and understanding the shifting contours of ghetto dislocation” (Watkins 2001:389). Scholars agree that other rap forms reflect a generic concern for chronicling the “black” experience, while gangsta rap is specifically interested in the black underclass in the ghetto (Keyes 2002:122; Rose 1994:12, 114; Smith 1997:346). Today gangsta rap purportedly provides an insiders’ look into black urban street life via crime and violence (Keyes 2004:4; Kitwana 1994:19).¹

Sociological scholarship on identity, culture, and violence in inner-city communities has largely overlooked rap music. Much of the existing literature assumes that the street code is a product of neighborhood processes and neglects additional sources such as popular culture which may reflect, reinforce, or even advocate street-code norms. This study builds on the existing literature through a content analysis of rap music that explores how the code is present not only in “the street,” but also in rap music. This research, however, does not suggest that rap directly causes violence; rather, it examines the more subtle discursive processes through which rap helps to organize and construct violent social identity and account for violent behavior.

Theoretically, the study considers how structural conditions in inner-city communities have given rise to cultural adaptations—embodied in a street code—that constitute an interpretive environment where violence is accountable, if not normative. It focuses on the complex and reflexive relationship between the street code, rap music, and social identity. Empirically, the study examines how rappers’ lyrics actively construct violent identities for themselves and for others. It explores the ways in which violence is justified and accounted for in terms that clearly resonate with the code of the street. I address these issues through a content analysis of 403 songs on rap albums from 1992 to 2000. As I will argue, the lyrics offer portrayals of violence that serve many functions including establishing identity and reputation and exerting social control.

Social-Structural Conditions in Inner-City Communities: The Context

Whereas studies of violent crime typically have been situated within an exclusively structural or subcultural theoretical framework, recent research argues that the causes of violence are both socio-structural and situational (Bruce, Roscigno, and McCall 1998; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Kubrin and Wadsworth 2003; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Sampson and Wilson 1995). Growing recognition of the utility of an integrative approach has led researchers to consider the relationship between structural disadvantage, cultural and situational responses to such disadvantage, and the perpetuation of violence within African American communities.

Structurally, the combined effects of poverty, unemployment, family disruption and isolation from mainstream America define the neighborhood context for residents in many inner-city neighborhoods. These “concentration effects” contribute to social disorganization

1. See Krims (2000:46–92) for a detailed description of differences in themes, flow, and musical style between other rap forms and gangsta rap.

(Sampson and Wilson 1995) and violence (Krivo and Peterson 1996; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). The social, political, and economic forces that have shaped these conditions include, among other things, globalization and deindustrialization (Rose 1994:21–61; Wadsworth 2004; Wilson 1996), residential segregation (Keyes 2002:44–45; Massey and Denton 1993), punitive criminal justice policy (Tonry 1995), and a legacy of slavery and discrimination (Hawkins 1985). The concentrated disadvantage found in many urban African American communities is not paralleled in predominantly white neighborhoods.

An important element of such disadvantaged communities is the opportunity structure available for residents. The inner city affords limited avenues for adolescents to obtain the types of social status and social roles available to youth in other environments (Rose 1994:27). Street-oriented peer groups dominate social roles, and few opportunities exist for broader participation in community life, such as after-school groups, volunteer organizations, or supervised athletics. Alternatives to conventional status attainment are thus limited to manifestations of physical power or domination, verbal agility, or displays of material wealth (Wilkinson 2001:235).

At the same time, illegitimate avenues for success abound. For many poor, young, black males, the opportunity for dealing drugs is literally just around the corner (Anderson 1999:114; Keyes 2002:184) and represents one of the most viable “job” options in the face of limited employment opportunities (Kitwana 2002:39). This is not to say that impoverished blacks bypass hard work as a prerequisite for success in life; young blacks, like most Americans who are given the opportunity to work, have demonstrated their willingness to do so (Newman 1999). But the continual demand for economic and social success, coupled with limited legitimate avenues and numerous illegitimate avenues by which to attain it, creates a unique situation unparalleled in white and middle-class black communities (George 1998:43).

The prevalence of drugs—and of crack cocaine in particular—generates more than increased illegitimate opportunities. Crack and the drug trade create neighborhood battles for the control over markets where violence is used as social control (George 1998:42; Keyes 2002:183). Elijah Anderson (1990) explains this phenomenon in his ethnography of North-ton, a poor, urban, black community: “Dealers have certain corners and spaces ‘sewed up,’ marked off as their own territory, and may prevent other dealers from selling either at a particular corner or even in the general area. At times these corners are bought and sold, leading to turf disputes and violence to decide who owns them. A ‘king of the hill’ competition may ensue, awarding the corner to whoever can claim it” (p. 85). Contributing to the violence, the ready availability of guns in these communities increases the stakes, often turning what would have been an assault into a homicide (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Wilkinson 2001:232).

Tenuous police-community relations contribute to these problems (see especially Anderson 1990:190–206). Residents of disadvantaged black communities, arguably those most in need of police protection, tend to be wary of the police, in part because of concerns about racial profiling and the possibility of being wrongfully accused. These practices cause residents who might otherwise assist the police to avoid them, to not cooperate with investigations, to assume dishonesty on the part of officers, and to teach others that such reactions are prudent lessons of survival on the streets (Anderson 1990; Kennedy 1997:153; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). Anderson (1990) notes, “Because the young black man is aware of many cases when an ‘innocent’ black person was wrongly accused and detained, he develops an ‘attitude’ toward the police. He becomes concerned when he notices ‘the man’ in the community . . . The youth knows . . . that he exists in a legally precarious state. Hence he is motivated to avoid the police and his public life becomes severely circumscribed” (p. 196). For many poor and working-class blacks, police and brutality are synonymous (Rose 1994:106).

Scholars have documented the disparities between black and white communities. In many cities, racial differences in poverty, joblessness, and family disruption are so great that the worst urban contexts in which whites reside are considerably better than the average context of black communities (Sampson 1987:354). These inequalities are even greater con-

sidering that incarcerated blacks, typically the most economically and socially disadvantaged social bloc, are not included in census counts (Western 2002).

In addition to racial inequality, patterns of economic bifurcation within the African American community have become more pronounced: “At one end of this bifurcated class structure are poor and working class blacks in ghetto communities that experience social, economic, spatial, and demographic isolation. On the other end is a black middle and lower-middle class buoyed by increased access to higher education and professional employment” (Watkins 2001:381). Although black middle-class residents may fare better than their lower-class counterparts, Mary Pattillo-McCoy (1999) finds that almost half of the black middle-class is concentrated in the lower-middle-class region, distinguished by its close proximity to the black working poor. Moreover, she finds that middle-class blacks do not perform as well as similarly situated whites on standardized tests, are more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses, are less likely to marry and more likely to be single parents, and are less likely to be working. Thus, we should be cautious in celebrating the achievements of the “fragile black middle-class” (Kitwana 2002:42).

In sum, the extreme, concentrated disadvantage and isolation of black inner-city communities coupled with the quantity and potency of drugs and availability of guns have created a situation unparalleled in American history; such conditions represent “previously unseen challenges in African American life” (Kitwana 1994:45; 2002:xx). These are the social-structural community characteristics from which a “code of the street” has emerged.

The Code of the Street and Neighborhood Subculture

In his ethnography of the moral life of the inner city, Anderson (1999) argues that a street code provides the principles governing much interpersonal public behavior. Given the bleak conditions, black youth in disadvantaged communities have created a local social order complete with its own code and rituals of authenticity (Anderson 1999; Henderson 1996; Keyes 2002:6; Kitwana 2002; Perkins 1996:20). This street code articulates powerful norms and characterizes public social relations among residents, particularly with respect to violence. Neighborhood structural conditions generate the subculture, so cultural differences reflect adaptations to structural inequality.

Social identity and respect are the most important features of the code. Respect—defined as being treated right or granted the deference one deserves (Anderson 1999:33)—often forms the core of a person’s self-esteem. One way to acquire respect is by developing a reputation for being violent, by creating a self-image based on “juice” (Anderson 1999:72). On the streets, the image one projects is paramount, and at the top of the hierarchy is the “crazy,” “wild,” or “killer” social identity (Wilkinson 2001:246). A person’s public bearing must send the message that he or she is capable of violence when necessary. In his study of inner-city Philadelphia communities, Anderson (1999:72) found that youth often created altercations with the sole purpose of building respect. Similarly, Deanna Wilkinson (2001) found that young men committed robberies in order to impress their peers and upgrade their social status. A third study found that youth from inner-city New York communities used violence for recognition (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998). In short, violence is thought to be the single most critical resource for achieving status among those who participate in street culture (Wilkinson 2001:243).

In this context, the gun becomes a symbol of power and a remedy for disputes. Since the 1970s, guns have been a central part of the changing character of youth violence (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998:106). For those who subscribe to the code, guns are the tactical choice for settling scores and asserting dominance in matters of honor, territory, and business (George 1998:42). The easy accessibility of guns in the inner city has raised the stakes of the street code even higher. Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna Wilkinson (1998) found that guns dominated

social interactions; youth reported having one close by in case it would be needed during a conflict. Regarding one youth Fagan and Wilkinson state, "It was understood that using a gun to harm his opponent was the best way to handle the situation both in terms of what was expected on the street and what an individual had to do to maintain a respected identity" (p. 139). For many youth, guns have become symbols of respect, identity, and power in addition to having strategic survival value.

Building a violent reputation not only commands respect but also serves to deter future assaults. For those invested in street culture, or for those who simply wish to survive (Keyes 2002:6, 166), a key objective of their demeanor is to discourage others from "testing" or "challenging" them. In some cases, manifest nerve—stealing another's possessions, mouthing off, pulling a trigger—builds a reputation that will prevent future challenges. However, when challenges arise or transgressions occur, violence is viewed as acceptable, appropriate, and even obligatory: "In the most socially isolated pockets of the inner city, this situation has given rise to a kind of people's law based on a form of social exchange whose by-product is respect and whose caveat is vengeance or payback" (Anderson 1999:66). If a person is assaulted, for instance, it is essential in the eyes of his peers and others for him to seek revenge, otherwise he risks being victimized. Walking away from conflict is risky to one's health:

To run away would likely leave one's self-esteem in tatters, while inviting further disrespect. Therefore, people often feel constrained to pay back—to seek revenge—after a successful assault. Their very identity, their self-respect, and their honor are tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such encounters. And it is this identification, including a credible reputation for payback, that is strongly believed to deter future assaults. (Anderson 1999:76)

In instances of payback, violence is considered an appropriate reaction to crime, not a crime itself, and the offender operates on the assumption that the victim provoked his own injury (or death) through an act of wrongdoing. As Donald Black (1983) explained decades ago, much crime is moralistic and involves the pursuit of justice; it is a mode of conflict management, a form of punishment—in some cases, it may even be capital punishment (see also Polk 1994:113). Much inner-city violence involves residents who characterize their conduct as a perfectly legitimate exercise of social control, as vengeful "self-help" (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). These residents are determined to show that justice is done, even if this means they will be defined as criminals; they do what they think is right and willingly suffer the consequences.

Violent social control is directly related to the availability (and effectiveness) of authoritative agents of dispute resolution such as the police—vengeful self-help emerges in the absence or weakness of third-party control (Black 1984:41; Horwitz 1990:128). In other words, crimes of self-help are more likely where the law is less accessible, such as, for example, in poor minority communities where residents have relatively less legal protection. When called, the police may not respond, which is one reason many residents feel they must be prepared to defend themselves and their loved ones (Anderson 1999:34). Indeed, a study of extremely disadvantaged communities in St. Louis found that problems confronting the residents were often resolved informally—without calling the police—and that neighborhood cultural codes supported this type of problem solving, even when the "solution" was a retaliatory killing (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). That residents frequently bypass the police to resolve disputes on their own confirms the street code as a "people's law based on street justice;" the code begins where the influence of the police ends and the personal responsibility for one's safety picks up (Anderson 1999:27).

Finally, the code of the street encompasses other related dimensions of street life in inner-city communities. For example, the code highlights the appreciation for material wealth as another way to establish self-image and gain respect. Nice cars, expensive jewelry, and the latest clothing fashions not only reflect one's style, but also demonstrate a willingness to possess things that may require defending. Likewise, respect and recognition are gained through sexual promiscuity and conquest. For young men, sex is considered an important symbol of

social status, which results in the objectification of women. The more women with whom a young man has sex, the more esteem he accrues. And given the harsh conditions in extremely disadvantaged communities, the street code recognizes a growing sense of nihilism in black youth culture, an outgrowth of living in an environment filled with violence and limited opportunities. Clearly these dimensions of the street code reinforce, and are reinforced by, respect and violence.

In sum, worsening conditions in inner-city communities over the last several decades have given rise, in large part, to the street code. These same conditions also define the context in which rap music has emerged. In studying rap, scholars maintain that “popular forms of music contain significant cultural traditions that cannot be severed from the socio-historical moment in which they take place” (Rose 1994:xiv; see also Keyes 2002:228; Watkins 2001). The production of rap, and gangsta rap in particular, corresponded with crucial shifts in the material worlds inhabited by young minority males. S. Craig Watkins (2001) notes, “the hyper-segregated conditions of the postindustrial ghetto became a fertile reservoir of cultural production” (p. 389). Rap music “anticipated the racial mood shifts and growing discontent of a generation of young black Americans who were either disillusioned by the racial hostilities brought on by participation in the societal mainstream or dislocated from the center of social and economic life altogether” (Watkins 2001:381). A question arises: what is the connection between inner-city life, the code of the street, rap music, and social identity? This is the focus of the next section.

The Street Code, Rap Music, and Social Identity

A naturalistic approach to understanding the culture-music-identity nexus would treat the street code as an explanation of behavior that operates much like a set of subcultural directives (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997:19–37; Holstein and Jones 1992). The subculture shapes and constrains residents’ behaviors, particularly with respect to violence. From this point of view, the code would be viewed as a source of motivations and sanctions that lead to violence (see Anderson 1999) and, as such, behavior would stem from rule compliance, or noncompliance, with the tenets of the code (see Part I of Wieder 1988). From this perspective, the street code projects a compelling normative order, and rap lyrics would be viewed as reproductions of the code offered up to describe black urban street life. Put most simply, the street code could be viewed naturalistically as a source or inspiration for rap lyrics; the code-inspired lyrics would then be understood to reflect—whether accurately or inaccurately—black urban youth culture. An analysis using this approach would treat rap lyrics as more or less verifiable reports of street life and violence in poor urban communities (see, for example, Allen 1996).

Alternatively, one could frame the street code as an interpretive resource used to constitute what is and what is not deviant (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:48; Part II of Wieder 1988). This “constitutive” perspective treats the code as a source of indigenous explanation whereby reality is organized and made sensible through language use: “It is a form of *social action* through which social actors assemble the intelligible characteristics of their own circumstances. Descriptions, accounts, or reports, then, are not merely *about* some social world as much as they are *constitutive of* that world” (Holstein and Jones 1992:305). Such an approach has been applied to studies of inmate accounts of “doing time” (Holstein and Jones 1992) and the informal code that permeates talk and conduct in a halfway house for convicted substance abusers (Wieder 1988).

In the latter work, Lawrence D. Wieder (1988) treats the convict code as a set of locally developed instructions for understanding resident conduct. In describing this approach, Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (1997) explain, “It became clear to Wieder that residents were doing much more than merely reporting on the features of their lives when they ‘told

the code.’ They were trying to accomplish things in the telling, ‘doing things with words’ to create the very social structures they were otherwise apparently just describing. They were, in practice, actively marking the border between deviance and nondeviance through talk and interaction” (p. 49). Wieder recognized that the code represents more than a normative structure available to members of a setting as well as to the researcher of their behavior: it is a set of interpretive guidelines that was variably conjured up by the residents themselves who used it to account for matters that required explanation. In other words, “the code was a living embodiment of social control, serving as a shared accountability structure for residents’ actions” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:49–50).

Applying this perspective to the current study, I argue that both the street code and rap lyrics are constitutive elements of contemporary black urban culture. Here culture is akin to an interpretive tool kit (Swidler 1990) that is useful for understanding residents’ experiences. As I will demonstrate, rap lyrics are discursive actions or artifacts that help construct an interpretive environment where violence is appropriate and acceptable. The lyrics—like the street code in Anderson’s study—create the sense of a normative climate of violence. They provide sometimes graphically detailed instructions for how to interpret violent, degrading conduct and in so doing create possibilities for social identity in relation to violence. From this point of view, a lyrical analysis is less concerned with how well rappers’ accounts comport with objective reality and instead focuses on how such accounts are used by rappers to reflexively accomplish a sense of reality—for themselves and for others. In the process, rappers articulate “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940) and “grammars of motive” (Burke 1945) to explain and account for street reality. In line with these classic approaches to rhetorical analysis, the constitutive approach is concerned with how words and grammar are used to constitute rather than report historical reality and its causes. Thus, for the purpose of analysis, I suspend belief (or doubt) in the motivations and explanations rappers offer for events and actions, and focus instead on account making as a persuasive project that constitutes situated realities.

This is not to suggest that the street code is insubstantial or without explanatory value. But neither the code nor culture more generally is deterministic. The code and rap music do not cause violence; violent conduct is far more complex than that. Because listeners interpret music in multiple ways, rap and its lyrics are appropriated and embedded into specific individual, familial, and community fields of reference. That rap music is a “localized form of cultural expression” is clearly evident in the work of Andy Bennett (1999a, 1999b:77) and of Tricia Rose (1994), who explains “Los Angeles county, Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, Newark and Trenton, Roxbury, and Philadelphia developed local hip hop scenes that link various regional postindustrial urban experiences of alienation, unemployment, police harassment, social, and economic isolation to their local and specific experience via hip hop’s language, style, and attitude” (p. 60).

Lyrics have situational and situated meaning. Moreover, their reception may be oppositional. For example, Keith Negus and Patricia Roman Velazquez (2002:141) point out that listeners may disagree with or reject lyrics resulting in disaffiliation, ambivalence, and disengagement with (rap) music.² Anticipated disaffiliation may even be part of the lyrics’ design (as in instances of irony, sarcasm, or hyperbole). That media content has multiple meanings and that audiences actively construct this meaning implies no direct relationship between music and identity (or behavior). The street code and rap music lyrics do not compel one to act, but they do provide an accountability structure or interpretive resource that people can draw upon to understand violent identity and conduct.

2. Press (1994) raises a similar point in her review of the cultural reception literature when she describes a sophisticated model of reception as a site of struggle between cultural industries, critics, and receivers. According to Press, “this model emphasizes both the importance of cultural judgments of authority, and the responses of groups with differential power in relation to these judgments” (p. 230). In essence, this approach fully incorporates the varied experiences and interpretations of those consuming popular culture.

That listeners of rap music are “actively involved in the construction of meaning” (Bennett 1999b:86) implies a complex and reflexive culture-music-identity relationship, as Simon Frith (1996), Negus and Velazquez (2002), and William F. Danaher and Vincent J. Roscigno (2004) all suggest. Instead of music lyrics reflecting pre-existing identities, in this view, they help to organize and construct identity. Frith (1996) states, “The issue is not how a particular piece of music reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience” (p. 109). Likewise, the development of cultural forms will be structured by the reciprocal and mutually influential dynamics of production and reception (Danaher and Roscigno 2004:52).

In short, rap lyrics instruct listeners in how to make sense of urban street violence and how to understand the identities of those who participate in (or avoid) it. They do so in ways that resemble what Anderson’s (1999) informants told him about street violence. Both sets of instructions—the everyday telling of the code by residents and the rappers’ telling of the code in music lyrics—provide potent and complementary sources of local culture. Through the telling of the code, both in the streets and in the music, residents and rappers actively construct identities and justify the use of violence. As I will show, the rap lyrics provide vivid “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940), which structure violent identities and justify violent conduct, providing a way for listeners to understand and appreciate violent conduct.

Data, Methods, and Analysis

To examine the street code in rap lyrics, I identified rap albums from 1992 to 2000 that had gone platinum (that is, had sold over 1,000,000 copies) during that period ($N = 130$).³ I examined rap albums generally, rather than only gangsta rap albums, because rap albums typically mix genres (Krims 2000:87), and many songs with street code elements would have been excluded from the analysis if only gangsta rap albums had been included. The criterion that an album had sold over 1,000,000 copies ensured that the music had reached a wide segment of the population.⁴

The 1992 to 2000 period was chosen because gangsta rap emerged in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Kelley 1996:147; Keyes 2002:104; Kitwana 2002:xiv; Krims 2000:83; Smith 1997:346; Watkins 2001:389), and while still popular today, beginning around 1999, it became highly commercialized (Kitwana 1994:23; Krims 2000:71; Smith 1997:346; Watkins 2001:382). Therefore, the year 2000 represents a turning point in the rap music industry whereby production values more clearly addressed commercial competition, pushing cultural production and reproduction aside. I chose to examine this time frame to capture a period

3. Not included are movie soundtrack and compilation albums.

4. One might ask whether such artists are the best “spokespersons” for the street code. Given their success, one could argue that these rappers may be removed from disadvantaged urban areas and not engaged in crime and violence, so that the authenticity of the imagery they construct is questionable. On the other hand, one could argue that the music industry highlights the outlaw character of rappers to establish their “street cred.” To explore these issues, I determined the number of rappers/rap groups in my sample ($N = 61$) that had been charged with and/or convicted of a felony. As criminal records are not publicly available, I obtained this information by reading magazine articles and articles on the web that provided information on the criminal records of rap artists. I was able to find numerous articles mostly from MTV.com, which has a news archive link with information on rappers dating back to the early 1990s. I created a database that recorded whether each artist, or any of the artists in a rap group, had been charged with and/or convicted of a felony along with the type of felony. I was conservative and coded “no” if unable to find any information on a rapper/group. The results show that nearly half (46 percent) of the rappers have been charged with and/or convicted of a felony and another 8 percent have been charged with and/or convicted of a serious misdemeanor. Some of the charges/convictions include: murder, stabbing, robbery, sexual assault, assault with a deadly weapon, aggravated rape, narcotics, terrorist threats, and bribery. These results are consistent with researchers’ general claims about rap artists’ brushes with the law (Keyes 2002:162). Ultimately, however, it makes no difference to my analysis since I am interested in the identity construction process and am indifferent to the authenticity of identity claims. In this article I examine *cultural* reproduction not *reality* reproduction.

when the fiscal priorities of the music industry were not so clearly dominating cultural commentary.⁵

The 130 albums had 1,922 songs. For the analysis I drew a simple random sample of 632 songs (roughly 1/3 of the sample) and coded each song in two stages. First, I listened to a song in its entirety while reading the printed lyrics in order to get an overview of the song.⁶ Second, I listened to the song again and coded each line to determine whether six street code elements were present (0 = no, 1 = yes): (1) respect, (2) willingness to fight or use violence, (3) material wealth, (4) violent retaliation, (5) objectification of women, and (6) nihilism.⁷ These elements were identified based upon a close examination of Anderson's (1999) work. They encompass the major points raised throughout his general discussion of the "code of the street." Although this article's focus is violence, I report the percentage of songs that discussed related themes for comparison. I coded the data conservatively, identifying themes only where it was clear that the lyrics reflected the street code. In cases of uncertainty about the meaning of a word or phrase, I consulted *The Rap Dictionary*, a comprehensive online dictionary of rap and hip-hop terms. As most themes are intricately linked, in those instances where lyrics referred to more than one theme at a time, each scored a "1" to create overlapping categories. Finally, in the relatively few cases where lyrics criticized or made light of the street code, I scored those as "0" so as to include only statements that endorsed the code.⁸

The findings are based on a sample size of 403 songs (64 percent of the total sample). During the course of coding, after song 350, I no longer encountered lyrics that described new aspects of the street code themes. I coded another 53 songs to ensure that I had reached saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967:111). In all, 1,588 minutes of music were coded for the analyses.

To assess intercoder reliability, an independent researcher identified a random subset of the sample ($n = 64$, 16 percent of the final sample) and listened to the songs, read the lyrics,

5. Critics argue that the record companies have exaggerated the violence in today's rap music as a marketing ploy. Watkins (2001:389) points out that whereas the early stages of production were managed by small independent record labels, the genre's success led to stronger ties, and consequently greater obligations, to the major record labels. Still, even as rap continues to make inroads into the commercial sphere of popular entertainment, it retains a strong identification with the street and the ethos of grass roots expression (Bennett 1999b:86; Rose 1994:19, 183). Many rap artists strive to remain "underground," refusing to identify with a pop market and insisting that staying "real" necessitates authenticity and a continued connection with the streets (Keyes 2002:122). Still, it is important to remember that rap music cannot be fully severed from the ties of the record industry, which has implications for a lyrical analysis. However, to minimize the influence of the record industry, I end my analysis in 2000.

6. Lyrics were obtained from *The Original Hip-Hop/Rap Lyrics Archive*.

7. "Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence" (Pratt n.d.). To capture nihilism while coding I looked for evidence of such things as bleak outlook on life, perceived or real sense of powerlessness, frustration and despair, fear of death and dying, and resignation or acceptance of death.

8. Although infrequent, examples of lyrics that denounced and/or made light of the street code include: "If others disrespect me or give me flack / I'll stop and think before I react / Knowing that they're going through insecure stages / I'll take the opportunity to exercise patience / I'll see it as a chance to help the other person / Nip it in the bud before it can worsen" (Beastie Boys, "Bodhisattva Vow"); "Get off your high horse or die off like extinction / Boriquans are like Mohicans, the last of the Po'Ricans / We need some unity, fuck all the jeeps and jewelry / The maturity keeps me six feet above obscurity" (Big Punisher, "Capital Punishment");

I tell you life is too short for it to be like that
We gotta be leaders, can't follow the pack
With all them fiends in the streets smokin' crack
What you give life is what it gives you back
Cause money in the ghetto ain't nothin' new
But when you make the money you gotta know what to do
Buy you a business or buy you a house
Just so the police can't wipe you out
I heard it in the streets, they say you the man
So try to help your brothers and lend a helpin' hand. (Too Short, "Thangs Change")

and coded the cases. Agreement percentages were computed, which reflect how often the researcher and I agreed that the street code theme was present (or absent) in the lyrics. Although the percentages vary slightly by theme, overall they suggest fairly strong agreement: 70.3 percent for respect, 79.7 percent for willingness to fight or use violence, 75 percent for material wealth, 82.8 percent for retaliation, 73.4 percent for objectification of women, and 87.5 percent for nihilism.

The first analyses I present are quantitative and describe the occurrence of violence (and the other themes) in the sample. The second analyses are qualitative and determine how rappers portray violent identities—both their own and those of others—and account for the use of violence in everyday street lives. Using content analysis, I looked for instances of violence (and related issues) in the lyrics and illustrate the results using representative quotations. During coding, I looked for evidence of violence, respect for being violent, the role of guns and other weapons, violent personae, violent retaliation, justification for the use of violence, and community support for violence. Since subthemes did arise in the process of coding the lyrics (e.g., violent retaliation for snitching, projecting a mentally unstable violent persona), I carefully searched for additional meanings in the data and incorporated them into the findings. In this way, the findings not only address how violence is characterized in rap music, but they also contribute to the theoretical framework for understanding the street code.

The “Street Code” in Rap Lyrics

The street code is clearly a staple of rap music lyrics. I found each street code theme prominently represented in the lyrics, albeit to varying degrees. Respect was the most commonly referenced theme (68 percent of the songs), followed closely by violence (65 percent). Material wealth and violent retaliation were mentioned in 58 percent and 35 percent of the songs, respectively. Finally, nihilism was present in 25 percent, and only 22 percent had references to the objectification of women, despite the common assumption that misogyny pervades rap music.

The qualitative review of the data underscores the centrality of violence in rap music and suggests that violence has several components. The discussion below considers the two most prominent functions served by violent imagery in rap lyrics: (1) establishing social identity and reputation, and (2) exerting social control. The discussion below includes 45 direct quotations by 21 different rappers. These quotations do not exhaust the universe of violence examples, but are representative.

Constructing Violent Social Identity and Reputation

In extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods, residents learn the value of having a “name,” a reputation for being violent, as a means of survival. To build such a reputation is to gain respect among peers (Anderson 1999:67). Accordingly, rappers often project images of toughness in their music, referring to themselves and others as assassins, hustlers, gangstas, madmen, mercenary soldiers, killas, thugs, and outlaws. Some rappers are even more colorful in their depictions: “untamed guerillas” (Hot Boys; “Clear Da Set”), “3rd world nigga” (Master P; “Making Moves”), “thuggish, ruggish niggas” (BTNH; “2 Glocks”), “hellraiser” (2Pac; “Hellrazor”), “trigger niggas” (Master P; “Till We Dead and Gone”), “the nigga with the big fat trigger” (Ice Cube; “Now I Gotta Wet’Cha”), “no limit soldier” (Silkk the Shocker; “I’m a Soldier”), “young head busta” (Hot Boys; “Bout Whatever”), “wig splitas” (Juvenile; “Welcome 2 the Nolia”), “cap peelers” (Mystikal; “Mystikal Fever”), “grave filler” (Juvenile; “Back that Ass Up”), “gat buster” or “trigger man” (Jay-Z; “It’s Hot”), “raw nigga” (Layzie Bone; “2 Glocks”), and “Sergeant Slaughter” (Killer Mike; “Snappin’ and Trappin’”).

To bolster this image of toughness, rappers describe how dangerous they and others are—or can be, if necessary. The Notorious B.I.G. raps, “Armed and dangerous, ain’t too many can bang with us,” while 2Pac boasts, “A little rough with a hardcore theme / Couldn’t rough something rougher in your dreams / Mad rugged so you know we’re gonna rip / With that roughneck nigga named 2Pacalypse (2Pac, “Strugglin’”). Cypress Hill references 187, the California Penal Code for murder, as a way to drive home their violent image: “1 for the trouble, 8 for the road / 7 to get ready when I’m lettin’ off my load / I’m a natural-born cap-peela’, strapped [armed] illa / I’m the West Coast settin’ it on, no one’s reala’” (Cypress Hill, “Stoned Raiders”). Master P describes the viciousness of his posse:

We couldn’t run from niggas cause we ‘bout it ‘bout it
I’m from the set where my niggas get rowdy rowdy
We gon’ hang niggas
We gon’ bang niggas
We gon’ slang niggas
Cause we trigger niggas. (Master P, “Till We Dead and Gone”)

In projecting a tough image, rappers allude to violent reputations whether for “kickin’ ass” or for “keepin’ an extra clip” in their gun: “I’m an assassin known for kickin’ ass / Show me who them niggas are, and watch me start blastin’ / It’s Mr. Magic, known for causin’ havoc / As long as I’m on your side, see there’s no need for panic” (C-Murder, “Watch Yo Enemies”); “I was born and raised for this gangsta shit / C-Murder be known for keepin’ an extra clip / My pops say look ‘em in the eye before I kill ‘em / P crank the ‘llac [Cadillac] up and let’s go get ‘em” (C-Murder, “How Many”).

Young inner-city males take reputation or “rep” seriously and exert effort into building it in order to gain respect (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998:148). Often rappers will instruct listeners on how to develop “rep” on the street: “Rep in New York is the cat burglar, the fat murderer / Slippin’ the clip in the Mac [Mac 10 submachine pistol] inserterer / Hurtin’ your pockets, droppin’ your stock to zero profit / Holding heroes hostage and mansions for ransom like DeNiro mob flicks” (Big Punisher, “Fast Money”); “Sterling [B.G.’s friend] lived a soldier, died a soldier / Had respect for knockin’ heads clean off the shoulder” (B.G., “So Much Death”); “Kickin’ niggas down the steps just for rep” (Notorious B.I.G., “Ready to Die”). In these examples, rappers authorize the use of violence to establish identity. In other words, the lyrics “accomplish [identity] in the telling” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:49).

At the top of the hierarchy is the “crazy” or “wild” social identity (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998:151). As a way to display a certain predisposition to violence, rappers often characterize themselves and others as “mentally unstable” and therefore extremely dangerous. Consider Snoop Dogg and DMX, both of whom had murder charges brought against them in the 1990s: “Here’s a little something about a nigga like me / I never should have been let out the penitentiary / Snoop Dogg would like to say / That I’m a crazy motherfucker when I’m playing with my AK [AK-47 assault rifle]” (Snoop Dogg, “DP Gangsta”);

Since I run with the devil, I’m one with the devil
I stay doin’ dirt so I’m gonna come with the shovel
Hit you on a level of a madman, who’s mind’s twisted
Made niggas dreams caught the last train, mines missed it,
Listed as a manic, depressin’ with extreme paranoia,
and dog I got somethin’ for ya!
Have enough of shit, startin’ off hard then only gettin’ rougher!
Tougher, but then came the grease, so if you wanna say peace,
Tame the beast! (DMX, “Fuckin’ Wit’ D”)

An important element of the “crazy” persona is having a reputation for being quick tempered (Katz 1988:99). In the chorus of “Party Up,” DMX warns others that even when he’s at the club partying, the slightest thing may set him off: “Y’all gon’ make me lose my mind (up in

here, up in here) / Y'all gon' make me go all out (up in here, up in here) / Y'all gon' make me act a fool (up in here, up in here) / Y'all gon' make me lose my cool (up in here, up in here)" (Chorus, DMX, "Party Up"). These lyrics show how the code is brought into play to account for matters that require explanation, in this case, for explaining a mood shift that may result in violence. DMX and others account for their violent behavior, which they render acceptable and appropriate given the circumstances. The lyrics supply a vocabulary of motive which, C. Wright Mills (1963) argues, offers "accepted justifications for present, future or past programs or acts" (p. 443).

Verbal assertions of one's violent tendencies are important in establishing identity, but physical assertions are necessary as well (Anderson 1999:68). So, while projecting the right image is everything, backing up the projection with violent behavior is expected. For this reason, some rappers project images of toughness by describing acts of violence that they have perpetrated on others. The Notorious B.I.G. explains how he point blank kills someone: "As I grab the glock, put it to your headpiece / One in the chamber, the safety is off release / Straight at your dome [head] homes, I wanna see cabbage / Biggie Smalls the savage, doin' your brain cells much damage" (Notorious B.I.G., "Ready to Die"). It is common for rappers to provide detail when describing violent situations. Some songs contain literally dozens of lines describing in rich detail incidents that precipitate violence, the persons involved, violent acts, weapons, ammunition, and the bloody aftermath. The descriptions often make explicit reference to elements of the street code: "Must handle beef, code of the street / Load up the heat, if these niggas think they could fuck around / Real niggas do real things / By all means, niggas knowin' how we get down" (Nas, "Shoot 'Em Up"). Here the rapper, Nas, accounts for his violent actions in ways analogous to what Wieder (1988) reported in his study of a halfway house. Wieder explains, "It [the code] was a device for accounting for why one should feel or act in the way that one did as an expectable, understandable, reasonable, and above all else acceptable way of acting or feeling" (p. 175). Nas's notion that one "must handle beef" not only accounts for his violent conduct; it also instructs listeners how to understand violent circumstances and violent responses, given the situation.

Firearms are often used to claim the identity of being among the toughest. In fact, guns—referred to by rappers as street sweepers, heaters, ovens, and pumps—have become *the* tactical choice for demonstrating toughness and for settling scores, as suggested by the Notorious B.I.G., "Fuck tae kwon do, I tote the fo'-fo' [.44 magnum]" ("One More Chance") and Dr. Dre, "Blunt in my left hand, drink in my right, strap [gun] by my waistline, cause niggas don't fight" ("Ackrite"). Both rappers acknowledge the important role of the gun in the ghetto and justify its use.

Further, rappers acknowledge an increase in gun use by showing how times have changed in the inner city (George 1998:42). Fagan and Wilkinson (1998:138) found that inner-city young males often characterized their neighborhood as a "war zone" and described the streets as dangerous and unpredictable, a sentiment echoed in many of the songs. For example, in "Things Done Changed" the Notorious B.I.G. reminisces about the past as he explains how conditions in the ghetto have become much more violent:

Remember back in the days, when niggas had waves,
Gazelle shades, and corn braids
Pitchin' pennies, honies had the high top jellies
Shootin' skelly, motherfuckers was all friendly
Loungin' at the barbeques, drinkin' brews
With the neighborhood crews, hangin' on the avenues
Turn your pagers to nineteen ninety three
Niggas is getting' smoked [killed] G, believe me
(Notorious B.I.G., "Things Done Changed").

The Notorious B.I.G. goes on to describe in detail how violence began to escalate as drugs, fighting, gambling, and general disorganization set in. Violent circumstances and experiences

are frequently offered as emerging norms as rappers depict the “reality” of street life—for them and for others. When rappers portray life in the streets as dangerous and unpredictable, they implicitly authorize the use of violence to establish identity and supply a vocabulary of motives for describing and understanding violent conduct.

As a result of worsening conditions, guns have become an everyday accessory in the ghetto. One study found that most young males carry guns and describe them as central to their socialization (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998:140). For many, carrying a gun is as common as carrying a wallet or keys. Rapper 2Pac makes this point clear in the chorus of “High Speed.” He is asked, “Whatcha gonna do when you get outta jail?” and answers matter-of-factly: “I’m gonna buy me a gun.” The lesson to learn is summed up in the chorus of C-Murder’s “Watch Yo Enemies”: “Watch your motherfuckin’ enemies / And you might live a long time / Watch your motherfuckin’ enemies / Stay strapped [carry a gun] cause the ghetto is so wicked now.” C-Murder both rationalizes his decision to carry a gun and instructs the listener that in everyday life one must “stay strapped” to stay secure. The lyrics are implicit, interpretive instructions for understanding “life in the streets”—not just for rappers, but for others as well.

Collectively, rap lyrics show how toughness and a willingness to use violence are articulated as central features of masculine identity and reputation. The rappers implicitly and explicitly use the code of the street to construct identities and in so doing they resemble Anderson’s (1999) respondents from inner-city communities in many important respects. As the above passages illustrate, rappers typically characterize life on the streets as violent and unpredictable and implicate this violence and their participation in it in their own identity work. The lyrics provide an implicit recipe for how to create a violent, but viable, street identity. The lyrics suggest that one learns the value of having a reputation for being tough in order to survive. The lyrics also enlist guns as signs of toughness; their possession is a significant identity marker. The lyrics tout “rep” as a means of gaining and sustaining respect among peers and preventing future challenges. In sum, the lyrics provide both a formula and a justification for violent street identities.

Portraying Violence as Social Control

As the problems of the inner city become more acute and police-community relations grow increasingly tentative, residents claim they must assume primary responsibility in matters of conflict (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). This often results in violence intended as punishment or other expression of disapproval. Most frequently violent social control is precipitated through disrespect. Rappers are virtually fixated on “respect”; they tell listeners that no one should tolerate disrespect and are clear about the consequences of such behavior, which can include death for the “perpetrator.” Whether referenced only in passing or explained in more detail, the message is clear. There may be severe penalties for disrespect:

Y’all punk muthafuckas ain’t got no nuts
I only be dealin’ with real niggas
Them other niggas, they get they ass put in check
When they try to flex and disrespect me
And that’s when I gotta get even with niggas, retaliation
(Krayzie Bone, “Thugz All Ova Da World”);

Gotta push the issue
On the fools that dis you
Whether pump or pistol
When it’s up in yo’ gristle [face]
Hand yo’ mama a tissue
If I decide to kiss [kill] you (Ice Cube, “Ask About Me”).

In the latter passage, Ice Cube not only warns others about the repercussions of disrespecting him, but also makes explicit the rules of the game concerning disrespect: payback is a must. Cube's lyrics instruct listeners that on the streets when one is disrespected one responds with violence. In this way, he constructs an interpretive environment where violence is accountable and acceptable, as both a means of constructing identity and of enforcing social control on the street.

Disrespect can come in a variety of flavors including disrespect by testing or challenging someone, disrespect through victimizing—usually robbing—someone, and disrespect by snitching. Each was serious enough to warrant violent self-help again and again in rap songs.

Responding to Challenges. Rappers are often vague in what constitutes being “tested” or “challenged”—two words commonly encountered in the lyrics. What they make very clear, however, is the *reaction* to being “tested” or “challenged,” summed up succinctly by the Notorious B.I.G., “Fifty-shot clip if a nigga wanna test,” and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, “A nigga wanna test, catch slugs, put ‘em in the mud”; “187 is a lesson for them niggas that want to test, bring more than one cause me shotgun will be buckin’ your chest.”

One form of testing or challenging involves “fucking with” someone or with his or her family, friends, or “posse.” To do so, according to the code, is to invite a virtual death sentence. In “It’s On,” Eazy-E bluntly states, “You try to fuck with E nigga run run run, cause if it’s on motherfucker, then it’s on G.” DMX describes the implications of “fuckin’ wit’ D”: “Fuckin’ wit’ me, y’all know somebody has / Told you about fuckin’ wit’ D, stuck in / A tree is what you will be, like a cat / And I’m the dog at the bottom, lookin’ up” (DMX, “Fuckin’ Wit’ D”). In a song appropriately titled “Murder III,” Mystikal is furious as he recounts the story of his sister’s death at the hands of her boyfriend. Mystikal tells the boyfriend, “I’m living for revenge”: “I know what you did, I’m comin’ to get’cha, you cannot live / Look, you sleep forever is the fuckin’ price / Shit, a throat for a throat, a life for a life” (Mystikal, “Murderer III”). And consider the lyrics from a Juvenile song: “I ain’t gonna let a nigga disrespect my clique / And I ain’t gon’ let a nigga come and take my shit / That’ll make me look like a stone cold bitch / So ain’t no way I ain’t gon’ grab my AK and let my shit spit” (Juvenile, “Guerilla”). Note Juvenile’s reference to looking like a “stone cold bitch” if he does not to respond to “niggas disrespecting his clique.” Here he strongly justifies the use of violent social control in order to not lose respect—a fundamental aspect of the code. As such, the lyrics serve as a vehicle by which Juvenile and other rappers explain and justify their actions. The message that one is not a pushover must be loud and clear. In this context, projecting the right image is everything, an image that must be substantiated with violent behavior (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998:136).

The code in the lyrics justifies a reciprocal exchange of punishments in cases where one’s friends and family are victimized. This position is not difficult to justify. According to the street code, even verbal disrespect cannot go unpunished (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). This seemingly mild form of disrespect is enough to provoke violent retaliation in numerous songs: “Talk slick, you get your neck slit quick / Cause real street niggas ain’t havin’ that shit” (Notorious B.I.G., “Machine Gun Funk”). In another song, Ice Cube warns that you should “check yo self”—watch what you say and do—because otherwise the consequences will be “bad for your health”: “So come on and check yo self before you wreck yo self / Check yo self before you wreck yo self / Yeah, come on and check yo self before you wreck yo self / Cause shotgun bullets are bad for your health” (Chorus, Ice Cube, “Check Yo Self”).

Resisting Victimization. Inner-city communities pose high levels of risk for victimization. Yet an important part of the street code is not to allow others to “get over on you,” to let them know that you are not to be messed with. So those who want to present themselves as streetwise signal to potential criminals (and anyone else) that they are not the ones to be targeted for victimization (Anderson 1999). Rap lyrics invoke such signals letting listeners know

that being disrespected through robbery victimization is a costly transgression: “You play with my life when you play with my money / Play around but this’ll be the last time you think somethin’s funny” (DMX, “One More Road to Cross”). Method Man insists that violent retaliation is an automatic response to robbery: “Niggas try to stick [rob] me, retaliation, no hesitation” (“Sub Crazy”). And the Wu-Tang Clan warns others that they can get “wild with the trigger” if need be: “Shame on a nigga who try to run game on a nigga / Wu buck wild with the trigger! / Shame on a nigga who try to run game on a nigga / We buck- I fuck yo’ ass up! What?” (Wu-Tang Clan, “Shame on a Nigga”). Rappers’ lyrics actively define the border between what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior—in other words, what will or will not provoke violent retaliation, as well as what is an appropriate and warranted response. By invoking rules and elaborating their application to specific cases, these rappers describe and constitute their activities as rational, coherent, precedented, and orderly (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:45). The concluding message to the would-be offender: “If you ever jack [rob] this real nigga, you’d besta kill me or pay the price” (C-Murder, “Ghetto Ties”).

Don’t Snitch. Violence as social control is perhaps best personified in cases of snitching, where rappers are not at all reluctant to administer capital punishment: “My next door neighbor’s having a convo with undercovers / Put a surprise in the mailbox, hope she get it / Happy birthday bitch, you know you shouldn’t a did it” (2Pac, “Only Fear of Death”). In many rappers’ eyes, the worst case scenario is to “end up Fed”: “And I don’t know who the fuck you think you talkin’ to / No more talkin’—put him in the dirt instead / You keep walkin’—lest you end up red / Cause if I end up Fed, y’all end up dead” (DMX, “Party Up”). DMX concludes with, “Sun in to sun out, I’m a keep the gun out, Nigga runnin his mouth? I’m a blow his lung out.” Entire songs may be devoted to warning others about the repercussions of snitching and testifying, as is Nas’ song “Suspect” with the chorus: “To the suspect witness don’t come outside / You might get your shit pushed back tonight” (Nas, “Suspect”).

These excerpts provide a glimpse of why, after a violent incident, residents of extremely disadvantaged communities are often unwilling to cooperate with the police out of fear of retribution (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). The lyrics virtually instruct observers to keep quiet and perpetrators to enforce silence. The code in the lyrics is strikingly similar to the one Anderson (1999) observed, whereby people “see but don’t see” (p. 133). The neighborhood mantra is “Niggas do unto these snitches before it’s done unto you” (2Pac, “Hell 4 a ‘Hustler’”), which clearly conveys that snitching is unacceptable and offers guidelines for how one should respond when encountering a snitch. Again, the theme of justified violence is clear.

Retaliation. In cases of snitching or disrespect, violent retaliation is portrayed as punishment and is characterized as an acceptable and appropriate response as part of the street code. In many instances violent retaliation is claimed to be not only appropriate but also obligatory: “You fucked with me, now it’s a must that I fuck with you” (Dr. Dre, “Fuck with Dre Day”); “Otis from the thirteenth bit the dust / It’s a must we strap up and retaliate in a rush” (B.G., “So Much Death”). In “Retaliation,” B.G. describes acts of retaliation and expresses the sentiment that retaliation is expected, a given, known to all, and therefore, clearly justified. It’s simple: “You done took mine, I’m a take yearn”: “Ain’t that cold? I heard a nigga downed my nigga / My partner just paged me and say they found my nigga / It’s a bust back thang can’t be no hoes / I got a hundred rounds plus for my Calico.” And later in the song: “You sleep six feet I tear down the whole street / Bust ya head up leave ya deader yo blood redder / Nigga what, keep ya mouth shut retaliation is a must.” Ms. Tee warns all in the chorus: “Niggas. . . . they comin’ to get’cha / You betta watch ya back before they muthafuckin’ split cha” (B.G., “Retaliation”). Retaliation, of course, builds “juice.” According to the lyrics, it is also a way to deter future assaults, as Rappin 4-Tay explains to 2Pac: “Pac I feel ya, keep servin’ it on the reala / For instance say a playa hatin’ mark is out to kill ya / Would you be wrong, for buckin’

a nigga to the pavement? / He gon' get me first, if I don't get him—fool start prayin'" (2Pac, "Only God Can Judge Me"). Again, we see how rappers justify the use of violence, this time as a deterrent.

Anderson (1999:33) suggests that everyone knows there are penalties for violating the street code. In their music, rappers use the implicit rules of the code as explanations for street behavior. By reference to aspects of the code, the lyrics mark what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior (e.g., don't challenge, victimize, snitch). The lyrics make sense of violence as an arguably accountable response to a wide variety of "offenses," while simultaneously identifying just what those "offenses" might be. The above passages show how the code is variably conjured up by rappers to instruct listeners on how to understand and account for their own and others' everyday actions. In this way, the code becomes a living embodiment of social control as it both serves to define offensive behaviors and accounts for the violence that might be forthcoming in response (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:49–50).

Rap Music and Cultural Codes

That violence constitutes a large part of rap music, particularly gangsta rap, is axiomatic. This study found that nearly 65 percent of the songs sampled make reference to some aspect of violence and many songs were graphic in their violent depictions. It is precisely for this reason that gangsta rap is controversial and unpopular with some segments of the population. Still, rappers tell important stories through their music. Some use their street knowledge to construct first-person narratives that interpret how social and economic realities affect young black men in the context of deteriorating inner-city conditions. Other narratives may be more mythical than factual. Regardless of their source or authenticity, rap lyrics serve specific social functions in relation to understandings of street life and violence.

In rap music, social identity and respect are the most important features of the street code. Lyrics instruct listeners that toughness and the willingness to use violence are central to establishing viable masculine identity, gaining respect, and building a reputation. As Anderson (1999) might suggest, the lyrics show how violent confrontations settle the question of "who is the toughest and who will take, or tolerate, what from whom under what circumstances" (p. 69). As was evident in many passages, references to guns are used to bolster these violent identities.

In cases of disrespect, the code—as evident in the lyrics—makes clear that payback is imminent. Rappers' lyrics delineate the rules and actively mark the border between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Moreover, the lyrics teach listeners how to appropriately respond in the event that rules are violated; they authorize the use of violent retaliation in certain situations and thereby prescribe violent self-help as a method of social control. As the lyrics showed, the code requires constant application and articulation with concrete events and actions in order to make the events and actions meaningful and accountable.

In examining how rappers use violence to establish social identity and reputation and exert violent social control, the study has carefully considered the relationship between the street code, rap music, and identity and behavior. As argued earlier, one approach is to treat the code as an explanation of behavior that operates much like subcultural counter-directives. From this view, the street code is a compelling normative order and rap lyrics are reproductions of the code that describe black urban street life. Any examination, therefore, would treat the lyrics as more or less accurate reports of street life and violence in poor urban communities.

The current analysis provides a different framing. Rather than encouraging residents to be deviant, here the code is seen as an interpretive resource—as a source of indigenous explanation whereby reality is organized and made sensible through language use—in this case, lyrics. As explained earlier, the code supplies an interpretive schema for seeing and

describing violent identity and behavior, and the lyrics are treated as reality-producing activities. In terms of analysis, this has led us beyond the artists' own explanations (the simple telling of the street code) in order to determine what is accomplished by the use of the code as an explanation of behavior. In other words, the focus has shifted from what is said by rappers to how they say it and what is socially realized in the process. I have bracketed rappers' claims about the causes of behavior in order to examine what is accomplished by making the claims. This has meant suspending belief in whether or not rappers' claims are true (Burke 1945; Gubrium and Holstein 1997:51). My analysis is indifferent to whether the reality rappers portray in their lyrics is an "actual" or "literal" one. What is important is that rap artists *create* cultural understandings of urban street life that render violence, danger, and unpredictability normative.

Of course, this cultural understanding legitimizes certain aspects of the street code while ignoring other important and arguably more positive aspects of urban life. Anderson (1999) devotes a significant portion of his book to discussing "decent" families and daddies and reminds us "to be sure, hustlers, prostitutes, and drug dealers are in evidence, but they coexist with—and are indeed outnumbered by—working people in legitimate jobs who are trying to avoid trouble" (p. 24). But what we mostly hear in rap lyrics are rappers touting the virtues of violence with little of the more mundane, yet positive, elements that emanate from the black community. This is not to say that the lyrics are inaccurate. But as a cultural force, gangsta rap music offers a particular characterization of urban life. While this version of local culture may be at odds with other versions, it is the one that gets the most "air play," so to speak. In that sense, it widely promotes an accountability structure in which violence is legitimized and condoned.

This raises another important issue: the characterization of rap music and its messages in the context of mainstream culture. Although Theresa A. Martinez (1997) and others (e.g., Negus 1999) recognize rap as a resistant, oppositional, countercultural form of expressive culture, they also argue that this culture "may be embedded within and even contribute to a dominant hegemonic framework" (Martinez 1997:272). I agree wholeheartedly. Rap music does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Rather, it expresses the cultural crossing, mixing, and engagement of black youth culture with the values, attitudes, and concerns of the white majority. Many of the violent (and patriarchal, materialistic, sexist, etc.) ways of acting that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values created, sustained, and rendered accountable in the larger society. Toughness and a violent persona have been central to masculine identity in myriad American social contexts. And young men come to identify the connections between masculinity-power-aggression-violence as part of their own developing masculine identities (Messerschmidt 1986:59). In short, gangsta rap is just one manifestation of the culture of violence that saturates American society as a whole—in movies, video games, sports, pro-wrestling, and other venues. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the values that underpin some rap music are very much by-products of broader American culture.

Indeed, in some cases rap music does not warrant the excessive criticism it receives. Recall that one finding from the analysis is that "objectification of women" or "misogyny" is not as pervasive in rap lyrics as originally thought. Likewise, it does not appear to be a significant part of the rappers' code—nowhere near as central as respect and violence. Of all the street code themes, "objectification of women" was least prominent in the lyrics. A greater percentage of the songs mentioned issues related to nihilism, a topic frequently overlooked in the literature and by critics. This is not to suggest that rappers be "let off the hook" for their violent and misogynistic lyrics but that critics recognize that rap music and misogyny are not synonymous and acknowledge the variability in topics covered by rappers.

Findings from this study suggest that violence researchers might look beyond traditional data sources (e.g., census reports and crime statistics) for the empirical traces of "culture in action" (Swidler 1990) that render violence acceptable. As I have argued, rap music does not

cause violence but extends the purview of the street code of violence and respect. Rappers' telling the street code in their music in conjunction with the everyday telling of the code by inner-city residents in community research (Anderson 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003) provide two potent sources of local culture—a culture of the streets in which violence is cast as a way of life.

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