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The Rebirth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Hip Hop: A Cultural Sociology of Gangsta Rap Music

Alexander Riley

Hip hop culture and rap music have been the object of considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Yet much of the literature on rap is either unconcerned with attempting to empirically locate the interpretive communities and reading formations of the increasingly diverse hip hop audiences. The subgenre of rap known as gangsta rap is particularly affected by this problem. This essay endeavors (1) to challenge notions in the existent literature about precisely who/what the 'hip hop community' is by looking at a segment of that 'community' that is rarely effectively examined, i.e., suburban, middle-class, largely white youth, and (2) to suggest a cultural theory that is better suited for understanding gangsta rap. A neo-Durkheimian theoretical apparatus is used to argue that an alternative model for understanding how some audiences make sense of gangsta rap should be based on notions of the transgressive sacred and piacular rites of mourning.

The Question of the Audience(s) of Gangsta Rap

Hip hop culture and rap music have been the object of considerable scholarly attention in recent years (for example, Rose 1994; Loza et al. 1994; Walser 1995; Potter 1995; Kelley 1996; Dyson 2001; Keyes 2002; Morrison 2003), as a cultural object once attended to only by popular journalism and other non-academic writers has begun to receive more attention from inside the academy. It has become increasingly evident, as hip hop culture and rap expand rapidly into new social spaces and as the theoretical sophistication of rap studies grow, that serious attention must be paid to the question of how specific youth audiences bring different reading formations to the culture and therefore find it meaningful in different ways. In this essay, I will pursue the first steps toward a cultural sociology of one particular variety of rap music, the subgenre known as gangsta rap, by carefully investigating the codes

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of meaning it taps into for at least one particular youth audience, and perhaps for others.

It is now a long-standing piece of conventional wisdom in cultural studies that if one wants to make any kind of argument about the meaning of a piece of culture, one needs to be concerned with the actual, empirical ways in which consumers of the cultural object read and make use of it. Simply talking about, for example, romance literature as an abstract cultural object by, for example, summarizing plots and character types in a number of such novels tells us next to nothing about what the women who actually read those novels in their specific and delimited 'interpretive communities' make of the plots and character types (Radway 1991, p. 468). The question of defining and locating as precisely as possible the specific audience whose reading one is purporting to excavate and describe is of great importance in the study of rap music. But even some of the best recent work on hip hop is not as clear on defining this issue as it perhaps ought to be. Cheryl Keyes (2002), for example, in some ways achieves major advances on previous studies of rap by taking on an explicitly anthropological/ethnomusicological stance and emphasizing the holistic project of studying a culture. Yet she still oversimplifies the task of establishing precisely where the 'hip hop community' she is studying is located. She goes on at some length, discussing insider and outsider status and describing the problem of establishing ethnographic integrity in the community, but nowhere does she adequately define the real audience(s) she means.

A case can be made on ethnographic grounds that there in fact *is* no one, single, monolithic 'hip hop community', as this is simply not an entity that can be located in one empirical site. Keyes tells us she did her ethnographic work for the book in Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn and in other New York boroughs, and most fans of rap music will understand the importance of these areas in the emergence of what Keyes calls 'the hip hop arts movement' (Keyes 2002, p. xi). But it is probably a stretch to imagine that these parts of New York can now, in 2005, be said to represent the entirety, or perhaps even the *core*, of the hip hop community. This community cannot be limited to New York, or even to just those who live all elements of the hip hop culture, for such classifications omit the large audiences outside those places who participate in at least some elements of this culture and make up a substantial element of its commercial consumers. Performing an ethnography of this community is inevitably more difficult than the already difficult task of gaining access to certain communities of artists living and working in New York City, unless one purports only to be speaking about the meanings generated in this one particular subset of the hip hop community.

Such an analysis, however interesting it is (and Keyes does have some very interesting things to say about the New York setting), can hope to tell us little of the numerically much larger audiences in, for example, the rural and suburban Midwest and South who buy and listen to rap CDs, thereby influencing through their consumption what is likely to emerge from the producers in the streets of New York she discusses, and dress and speak in ways modeled on images of hip hop culture exported into the heartland by MTV and other media.

This question of audience is essential to understanding the meanings and symbols of the very popular subgenre of rap known as gangsta rap. This variety of rap music is frequently subjected to withering criticism from academic and popular writers alike, largely for reasons concerning what are seen as the non-progressive politics of the subgenre's lyrics. Tricia Rose (1994), for example, clearly has some difficulty effectively dealing with the work of gangsta artists such as NWA, Dr Dre, and Snoop Dogg. In fact, references to Dre and Snoop in her book are essentially limited to a few comments about their sexism and gossip-mongering about Dre's alleged penchant for 'beating up former girlfriends'. However, Dre's first post-NWA solo album featuring Snoop, and Snoop's hugely successful first solo album were among the biggest sellers in rap music in the two years prior to the publication of Rose's book (Rose 1994, p. 179), so it seems curious that she would have so little to say about that overwhelming fact. Others are equally troubled by serious engagement with interpretation of this genre of hardcore rap. Steven Best and Doug Kellner characterize Snoop Dogg's music reductively as 'apolitical, narcissistic, sexist' and reduce Tupac Shakur's complex narratives of 'thug life' to an agonized, repentant 'regret' that he was not saved from this life by 'his mother and the preachers' (Best & Kellner 1999, pp. 7–8). Still other commentators on the genre are barely distinguishable in tone and argument from media reactionaries like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly in their insinuation that gangsta rap is one of the chief contributors to the total disintegration of American civilization. For these commentators, the only real message to be deciphered from this piece of American culture is 'that the best way to end a problem is to shoot it' and the only fact we need to understand about its producers is that they are ignorant pawns of sinister corporate interests who care nothing whether entire communities shoot or drug themselves into non-existence (Ro 1996, p. 11).

The Alienation of the Baby Bust Suburban Audience and Gangsta Rap

A serious consideration of the meaning of gangsta rap from a cultural sociological perspective must endeavor more carefully to establish the specific and contextualized frameworks of interpretation provided to the music by its creators and brought to it by its consumers. Surprisingly, relatively little close investigation has been made of the well-known phenomenon of large numbers of non-urban and suburban middle-class youth (of all races, but predominantly white) who are consumers of this culture. Nelson George has argued convincingly that it is simply incorrect to claim that, even at its origin, hip hop was a solely black cultural enterprise. In the culture's earliest days, Latino breakers and white and Latino taggers played essential roles, white (especially Jewish) entrepreneurs were crucial at all points in the culture's evolution, and non-urban, non-black consumers were important in its growth from at least the early 1980s (George 1998, pp. 57–64). It is no secret that this audience of predominantly white, suburban consumers exists, and that indeed the explosion in the 1990s of gangsta rap would have been impossible without it, but relatively little attention has been focused here by scholars. How precisely is *this* audience, whose

conditions of life are so clearly very different from the monolithically urban, black and lower-class audience suggested by much existing literature on rap, reading the symbols and narratives of gangsta hip hop?

In many ways, it is still true that:

neither side of the debate [that is, the political left that champions rap and the political right that acknowledges its influence but sees that as a negative cultural fact] has been prepared . . . to confront what the entertainment industry's receipts . . . prove beyond doubt: although rap is still proportionally more popular among blacks, its *primary audience is white and lives in the suburbs*. And the history of rap's degeneration from insurgent black street music to mainstream pop points to another dispiriting conclusion: the more rappers were packaged as violent black criminals, the bigger their white audiences became. (Samuels 1995, p. 242; emphasis added)

Of course to classify this phenomenon as a 'degeneration' and as 'dispiriting' is to prematurely bring normative categories into what I would argue must first be an effort to effectively understand this piece of culture and its changes. But in addition to this contestable claim about the white, middle-class audience's motivation, Samuels indicates a distinction in reading formations of various audiences of rap music that provides a good springboard for further investigation:

Songs like 'White Lines' (with its anti-drug theme) and 'The Message' (about ghetto life) had the desired effect, drawing fulsome praise from white rock critics, raised on the protest ballads of Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs. The reaction on the street was somewhat less favorable. (Samuels 1995, p. 244)

Here, he is suggesting that the general reading formation of the critics (white or otherwise) is not readily empirically demonstrable on the street; that is, other audiences might bring different symbolic tools to bear in deciphering the music and the culture. Indeed, we have good evidence from throughout the popular music realm that audience responses to the same music and/or artists are not uniform among different listening populations. Deena Weinstein (2002), for example, suggests we can easily locate at least two different kinds of consumer when we are dealing with a variety of popular music that has achieved acclaim both commercially and critically. Her study of fans of the rock group Pink Floyd indicates that this audience can reasonably be delineated into what we might call a populist audience and an elite audience. The former are 'greatest hits fans' who know and enjoy Pink Floyd music that is the most commercially accessible and successful (e.g., the *Dark Side of the Moon* and *The Wall* LPs), while the latter are 'select fans who enunciate the words to songs that were never hits and who nod knowingly at significant phrases' (Weinstein 2002, p. 106). Similarly, there are members of the listening audience of Jay-Z or Snoop Dogg who are greatest hits fans (e.g., they know 'Big Pimpin'" and 'Gin and Juice', but not 'Come and Get Me' and 'Down 4 My N's'), and there are members of those audiences whose involvement in the music is broader and deeper. The first group are essentially the people focused on (at least implicitly, even if not via actual

ethnographic research) by much academic attention to hip hop and rap, and that audience perhaps is reflective of the kinds of claims that literature makes about the meaning of rap. The second group is generally either unexplored or not even acknowledged to exist. More attention needs to be paid to the possibility of such split audience reception frameworks in hip hop cultures if we are to accurately understand the multiple ways in which this set of cultural objects is deciphered in practice.

Can we then suggest anything more concrete in the way of a research program and an interpretive framework for gangsta rap music, given the existence of this significant consumer base in the suburban middle class? Donna Gaines's (1992) study of suburban white baby-bust-generation music listeners is helpful in understanding more concretely this relatively new rap audience we want to examine. This core of alienated youth she encountered in the suburbs of New Jersey who were drawn to heavy metal and thrash approached the music not as a politics [1], but instead as a kind of 'religion' that suggested a whole worldview and a narrowly delimited set of cultural symbols that gave their lives a set of meanings outside of the mainstream adult world, without for all that positing itself as an oppositional political/social movement or even as a counterculture. Signs of the occult, mysticism and 'Satanteenism' (a phenomenon Gaines distinguishes from Satanism in noting the former's emphasis on elements of fantasy and role-playing instead of the explicitly criminal activities that mainstream American culture and its popular media most often claim to be the product of Satan worship) made up the elements of some of these subcultures, while others (those more centered on thrash music) celebrated a bleak, tragic vision of life and a kind of fatalistic embrace (at least at the symbolic level) of death in the midst of an effort to escape the broader society from which they felt such alienation through partying. All of these youth subcultures involve something much more than the simple 'nihilism' claimed by parents and critics; they represent symbolic systems from which the young people involved in them draw sustenance and meaning. More, they explicitly reject the politicized vision of music embraced by their parents' generation (i.e., that of the baby boomers) and all of its incarnations in their own generation (e.g., the music of U2) (Gaines 1992, p. 205).

Elements of this suburban, middle-class, baby-bust generational approach to music as a cultural system can be seen effectively in the Penelope Spheeris (1981) documentary on Los Angeles punk of the 1980s. One of the things that consistently differentiated Los Angeles punk from its New York and British counterparts was its less overtly politicized orientation and its greater concern with the issues of alienation and ostracism faced by youth of the same baby-bust generation examined by Gaines. Often misconceived by outsiders to the subculture as merely 'nihilistic' or 'pessimistic', this subculture has been described by many of its members and ex-members as in many ways adhering to a system of values not unlike those identified by Gaines. I will suggest that there are some clear empirical connections between the kinds of subcultures Gaines observes and the gangsta rap audience that bear more examination. For example, many youths in this generation and social location listen to both metal/thrash/hardcore music and hardcore rap, and indeed entirely new

subgenres of popular music and culture (e.g., rap metal) have emerged from this audience's tastes and practices.

Gaines also points out expertly how purportedly more sophisticated readers of culture frequently attempt to denigrate and reduce the reading of culture by these consumers to simplistic narratives. Media renderings of heavy metal and thrash cultures on programs such as *20/20* produce a vision of those cultures indecipherable to the youth who live most closely with the music. The basic thing those sources seek to teach us about the metal cultures is that they are dangerous and politically retrogressive and that youth should be actively turned against them. Of course, much public and media discussion of gangsta rap speaks precisely the same language. Indeed, some of the academic treatments of the topic engage in a slightly diluted version of the same kind of criticism; while praising hip hop generally and endeavoring to defend it against real or perceived attackers elsewhere, they dismiss gangsta rap and culture as somehow inconsistent with the 'real' goals of hip hop culture—'gangsta rap is killing hip hop', as one writer puts it (Ro 1996, p. 11).

Reading Gangsta Rap as Tragic Cultural Narrative on the Transgressive Sacred

How might we begin to construct a cultural sociology of gangsta rap that will take the autonomy of culture seriously? This entails a reading of this genre of rap music that borrows theoretically from rather different sources than those generally drawn on by the existing literature on hip hop. There exist cultural theoretical sources for an alternative reading of the cultural production and reception of gangsta rap that we can loosely call neo-Durkheimian.

Let me insist, before I embark on a detailed discussion of these sources, that my suggestion that popular culture can and should be read primarily as a form of culture with, at least in some instances, autonomy from social structure is rooted in a close historical understanding of popular culture. It has been argued by at least one prominent historian of popular culture that much of the foundation of modern popular cultural forms can be located historically in medieval festival tradition, of which Carnival was a central element, and these festivals—while clearly carrying political meanings and even giving birth to political protest movements in some situations—were most obviously ritualistic sites in which community solidarity could be expressed and adherence to the social order could be maintained by focusing desires for transgression into narrowly-defined and accepted festive forms and times (Burke 1978, pp. 200–204).

There are cultural theories that explore still further the connections between these nascent forms of popular culture and fundamentally religious rituals and modes of experience. There is, more specifically, in a number of post-Durkheimian sources an augmented approach to culture that enables an understanding of culture as intimately tied to the tragic. Durkheimian theory differs significantly from the more social structure-centered sociological theories in that it takes culture seriously as an autonomous, creative force in society, rather than viewing it simply as an effect of

more fundamental structural economic relations. In Durkheim himself, one finds the framework for an understanding of culture as centered on the sacred, a category that Durkheim splits into pure and impure forms, or forms emphasizing, respectively, reverence and transgression. Roger Caillois (1988) defines the theory of the impure sacred as 'la théorie de la fête' because the impure, transgressive sacred is so clearly linked to social gatherings of festive, ritualistic, religious importance in the societies studied by anthropologists. He cites the classic study of the Kwakiutl by Marcel Mauss as an example of a society divided clearly into profane time and sacred time, and it is an example that shows clearly what the sacred in its impure, transgressive form looks like. In summer Kwakiutl families live alone and separated from the rest of the community, while they recongregate in winter for collective religious festivals of profound excess and transgression of normal moral rules and behavior (Caillois 1988, pp. 132–133).

Obviously, sites of festive behavior (clubs, parties, etc.) are one of the chief settings in which consumers of rap music engage the cultural symbolism of hip hop. Just as the youth populations studied by Gaines clearly participate in a more or less informally organized network of collective gatherings dedicated to activity directed toward the sacred objects of their heavy metal subcultures (and to other transgressive activities such as drinking alcohol, drug consumption, sexual activity, etc.), so do gangsta hip hop youth cultures have their networks of such sacred spaces and collectivities. Discussions in gangsta rap texts of parties, rap shows, gang or (in more middle-class and suburban settings) other close-knit and deviant youth collectivities that function in some situations like quasi-families, and the transgressive activities that occur in these gatherings, are myriad, and consumers of this music clearly read the music at least sometimes from within these kinds of spaces. The music thus provides a symbolic framework for orgiastic transgression and 'ex-stasis', which, as described by Peter Berger (1963), is the literal stepping outside of the quotidian and mundane.

The tragic as cultural form/framework and narrative enters the picture here. I want to suggest that the dramatic framework and deep ethical structure of tragedy provides an unconscious template for the reading of gangsta rap music by at least some of its audiences. A brief definition of tragedy is a dangerous undertaking, as much as has been written on this topic. In broad terms, I follow Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's distinction between three highly general cultural worldviews: the Christian, the dialectical, and the tragic (Deleuze 1983, p. 10). The first consists of a vision of the world in which human destiny and action is framed by a compassionate God who offers salvation and an end to suffering to those who choose morally correct paths. The dialectical vision is essentially Hegelian in understanding history as a progressive chain of events in which theses and antitheses work themselves out in interaction and produce a seamless, if conflict-based, historical journey towards an ahistorical Utopia at the end of that history; Marxist and neo-Marxist views of the human world as fundamentally about class or other kinds of social conflicts (e.g., gender, racial, etc.) that eventually are expected to be resolved by the ideal political state are prototypical

of this version. The tragic vision, unlike the other two, offers no comfortable resolution of human conflict and suffering. These are seen instead as eternal conditions of human destiny and the only way to transcendence is in the meeting and overcoming of fear of that condition. The tragic character encounters a situation of moral complexity, wherein 'awareness exceeds power, and particularly where awareness of a major need exceeds the power to satisfy it' (Jaspers 1953, p. 17) and wherein clearly and finally separating 'good guys and bad guys' (a simple business for the Christian and dialectic visions) is impossible. There is no simple redemption, 'no happy ending, no sense that something else could have been done, and no belief that the future could, or can, necessarily be changed' (Alexander 2003, p. 53). The ethical action consists of the manner in which the character meets with his/her destiny. The tragic hero refuses to denigrate the inevitable condition of suffering and conflict; instead he/she 'make[s] suffering an affirmation' as 'the sufferings of individuation absorbed in the joy of original being' achieve the unity in experience of the individual and the social (Deleuze 1983, pp. 12, 16). Alexander provides a good cultural example of the distinction in his discussion of the shifts in the American cultural discourse around the Holocaust. He compares a 'progressive' narrative, in which the suffering of the Holocaust is 'redeemed' by the understanding that Nazism was an anomalous, one-time-only evil that had been defeated once and for all, with a 'tragic' one, in which a 'trauma drama' emphasizes 'that evil is inside all of us, and in every society . . . [that] we are all the victims, and all the perpetrators, [and therefore] no audience can legitimately distance itself from collective suffering' (Alexander 2003, pp. 37–55).

With this definition in hand, it is an easy matter to locate narratives in gangsta rap that fit it. For, if tragedy as culture was seen at one time as the domain only of the elites and of high culture (see, for example, Graña 1989, p. 87), it seems clear that we can now recognize that such cultural narratives cannot be so easily limited to specific social groups and classes, as the very distinctions between high and popular culture on which they rest have come under powerful attack. Much of the music in the genre of gangsta rap embraces a perspective in which the narrator sees clearly his/her inevitable suffering, or even his/her own demise, and yet still embraces the terms of the field on which this has been constructed. Just a few of the myriad existing examples will illustrate this:

They giveth and they taketh, life is cruel that way . . . Life is all about guns and roses, bittersweet like friends and foes is, some get left behind, some get chosen . . . Flowers need water to grow, it gotta rain, in order to experience joy, you need pain, every time a baby is born, somebody's slain, you know the sayin', somebody's loss is another's gain, the sun comes out when the water goes down the drain, a rainbow then the clouds come out, we do it again. (Jay-Z, 'Guns and Roses')

God bless the dead, and bury, nigga, don't worry, if you see God first, tell him shit got worse, I ain't mad, I know you representin' the crew, and I can picture you in heaven with a blunt and a brew . . . The other day, I thought I seen my homeboy

Biggie, sayin' 'shit don't stop, nigga, no pity' . . . God bless the dead, it don't stop . . . Never runnin' 'less I'm comin' atcha, cry later, but for now let's enjoy the laughter, God bless the dead. (Tupac Shakur, 'God Bless the Dead')

Many men wish death upon me, Lawd, I don't cry no more, don't look to the sky no more . . . Sunny days wouldn't be special if it wasn't for rain, Joy wouldn't feel so good if it wasn't for pain, Death gotta be easy, 'cause life is hard, it'll leave you physically, mentally and emotionally scarred. (50 Cent, 'Many Men')

We can see similarities between the way in which these narrators position themselves and the position of tragic dramatic characters like Hamlet. Such characters are in possession of dreadful knowledge that others lack, and they recognize that this knowledge will ultimately prove fatal. Yet they accept that fact and proceed in action with that knowledge, essentially recognizing that there is no solution that can avoid the terms of the field of play and choosing affirmation rather than rejection of the hand they have been dealt.

But even if we can locate this cultural narrative at work from the production end in at least some of the relevant texts, what evidence do we have that an audience is deciphering the music from this reading formation? A firm answer to this question must of course await the careful empirical research into the responses of consumers only suggested here, but minimally it seems at least as justifiable to posit this kind of reading from our middle-class, suburban audience as to imagine *a priori*, as do some commentators (for example, Fasnacht 2002; Rudman & Lee 2002), that the main sense this audience makes of this music and culture concerns the reinforcement of negative and racist stereotypes of blacks, especially given the significant evidence of progressive change in racial attitudes in the past several decades. Likewise, the focus we find in other literature on the inconsistent appearance in gangsta rap of some of the politicized meanings championed by critics as the centerpiece of the meaning of rap seems rather less compelling when we consider that we are here dealing with an audience that to a significant degree simply is not socially located in such a way as to make such urban, black, political concerns likely or all that relevant to their own cultural worlds.

The Piacular Rites of Gangsta Rap: Making Sense of Violence

Another Durkheimian piece of this framework for understanding cultural meaning, which might be useful for understanding how even the black underclass audience makes sense of gangsta rap, can be located in what Durkheim defines as the piacular rites of religious community. These are the rites of collective mourning that a community undergoes upon the death of a member of the group, rites imposed by the unity of the group. These mourning rites obviously are expressed in ways that outwardly invoke sadness and loss ('dejection, cries, and tears'), but their effect is precisely the same kind of collective effervescence that Durkheim notes in the positive cult (Durkheim 1961, pp. 442, 445). It is in fact in describing this peculiar kind of

ritual activity that Durkheim introduces the well-known distinction between the pure and the impure sacred, emphasizing that what may appear simply evil or distressing to onlookers may in fact be approached as a sacred object in its fundamental religious character indistinguishable from the more traditionally recognized pure forms of the sacred.

Of course, the culture of mourning and the invocation of the necessity of revenge as retaliation for the slaying of friends in tragic/gangsta rap and hip hop culture are eminently visible. Tupac Shakur is perhaps the artist most known for devoting whole songs to mourning fallen comrades of the streets (e.g., 'How Long Will You Mourn Me?', 'Life Goes On', 'God Bless the Dead'), and even forecasting and mourning his own demise before the fact—but he is hardly alone. The Notorious B.I.G. delved frequently into this realm as well, both framing whole CDs with narratives of the mourning of his own imagined death, later followed by his actual murder (e.g., 'Life After Death Intro') and recounting narratives of ritual vengeance (e.g., 'Somebody's Gotta Die'). He was also mourned in song by his associate Ice Cube in 'If I Should Die Before I Wake', a song to which he posthumously contributes the opening verse and the chorus. Ice Cube himself earlier contributed one of the classics in this genre with 'Dead Homiez'. Snoop Dogg's 'Buck 'Em' and 'Down 4 my N's' also embody this symbolic framing of the tragic ritual requirement of vengeance as an outflow of deep commitment to the community of fellows. The tenor of these songs is often noted by other commentators, but it is curious that they are almost always read in a way that emphasizes the lyrics as provocation to or celebration of violence, rather than as a symbolic response to and interpretation of already existing violence. In other words, without an explicit effort to research the ways in which actual consumers of this culture make sense of it, it is insufficiently rigorous to condemn the music as a spur to more violence, rather than to investigate the possibility that it is instead (or also) an important cultural way of explaining and understanding already existing violence.

This focus on vengeance is of course a venerable concern of much cultural symbolism. Girard notes that primitive religious ritual typically diverts vengeance via sacrificial channels, while our own modern societies attempt to curb it via rational, judicial mechanisms that in fact do not so much reject the violence that engenders vengeance as they place the authority for overpowering violence on one side of any dispute (Girard 1977, p. 22). I would suggest that we can understand gangsta rap culture sufficiently only if we, like Girard, closely examine the role(s) that violence plays within that subculture. I have already summarized how elements of popular culture emerge from the same religious practices that are fundamentally about symbolically framing and funneling violence. Girard takes us still further in this direction by pointing out how the cultural drama of tragedy is concerned with this same problem of violence and vengeance. Much tragedy emerges as a result of familial, often brotherly, conflict over thrones and familial authority, which stands ultimately for the divinity (Girard 1977, p. 143). These conflicts are not amenable to peaceful and final resolution by their very nature, and indeed they generally recycle themselves from generation to generation, often with protagonists taking on

diametrically opposed positions in different manifestations of the same eternal conflict (e.g., Oedipus moves from oppressor to oppressed in the two tragedies *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*) (Girard 1977, p. 150). This certainly resonates with the nature of much violence expressed and symbolically enacted in gangsta rap music. Revenge here is theorized as a complex but necessary, even desired, part of a cultural logic—as Shakur puts it in ‘Hail Mary’: ‘Revenge is like the sweetest joy next to gettin’ pussy’.

It is of course a complex and charged task to deal with this aspect of gangsta rap in a way that is not simplistically critical or dismissive. Accusations of embracing and celebrating a language of violence that has real effects on real individuals are easy to formulate. Keyes, for example, even after offering a mild defense of some gangsta rap that resonates to a degree with my argument earlier that it can be seen as a kind of piacular rite with positive functions, notes that many consider it ‘problematic’ and even ‘racist’ when ‘imitators [with] no direct link to or experience of the context from which this music sprang’ take up elements of this culture (Keyes 2002, p. 220). The implication is of course that in taking up this cultural symbolism these others (e.g., whites of all classes, international audiences, middle-class blacks) do so in a way inconsistent with that of those recognized as the makers of the culture (poor blacks), and in a way that ultimately reflects negatively on the latter. But it is not at all self-evident that this is so. Such accusations that any reflection on the violence in gangsta rap that avoid simple denunciation inevitably presents a negative image of those who participate in that culture seem ill-considered, given the fact that I suggest that much of the force of the way in which these themes resonate for the middle-class audiences I have described here is at precisely the *symbolic* level. That is to say, the cultural objects can be read in the way I suggest without a necessary outcome in actual violence and murder; and indeed they generally are, at least by the audiences I have discussed here (namely, middle-class youth of various ethnicities).

The Rap Battle and Gangsta Agonism

A final element of gangsta rap music and hip hop culture can profitably be discussed under the aegis of the cultural model explicated here. The phenomenon of battling in hip hop culture is well-recognized and discussed in the existent literature. Usually tied to historical African-American (and African) practices such as signifying or the dozens, it has long been understood as a key element in hip hop culture, and some significant efforts exist to understand it as part of a larger set of linguistic practices peculiar to the African-American situation. Yet relatively little has been done to try to make sense of this phenomenon in broader cultural theoretical terms. Furthermore, little serious effort exists in the way of trying to make sense of the more extreme elements of this practice that are to be found in gangsta rap music. All hip hop fans know, for example, that two of the greatest figures in gangsta rap, Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G., were murdered in what was seen by many as a consequence of a large-scale rap feud/battle between Shakur’s West coast camp and Biggie’s New York

following. In many versions of the story, Shakur began to publicly denigrate and attack Biggie after he came to believe that the latter and members of his camp had set him up for a robbery and shooting that occurred as Shakur was emerging from a late night recording session in New York City. This eventually led to the two sides becoming more and more antagonistic to one another, culminating in Shakur's murder in Las Vegas and a retaliatory strike against Biggie while he was at a party in Los Angeles.

But is there a way to make sense of this feud from within the cultural framework of battling in hip hop? What precisely is the motivation for battling? It is a central and highly respected endeavor within the hip hop culture in which rappers demonstrate to one another and to onlookers who has the most skill at creating rhymes, which in a battle will be explicitly directed in an antagonistic way at the opponent. It is in these terms a clear manifestation of *agon*, or aggressive competition between two parties or teams, one of the varieties of game outlined by Roger Caillois (1992) in his neo-Durkheimian effort to discuss culture in terms of games and play. Play, according to Caillois, can in many ways be seen as parallel to the realm of the sacred, for both are opposed to the mundane world of production and everyday life, both are domains rich in symbolism, both are characterized at once by careful regimentation and precise rules *and* by exuberance and ecstatic emotion (Caillois 1988). Looking at battling in hip hop from this perspective allows us to understand more carefully its sources and its appeal. For, despite the evident dangers of hip hop battles being taken to the extreme, as in the case of Shakur and B.I.G., many consumers of the culture continue to see battles as among the most exciting and desired elements of the culture. The massive attention given to more recent such battles between Jay-Z and Nas, and the ongoing battle between Ja Rule, on one side, and 50 Cent and Eminem, on the other, is clear evidence of this. Each of these battles carries recorded evidence of the 'beef' in the widely-released CDs of each participant, but an entire underground network exists in which recordings not destined for mass release but directed specifically at the battle are distributed, exchanged, and highly coveted.

Why this extravagant and, in the view of many critics, dangerous attention to battling? Arguably, in gangsta hip hop, which is centrally about painting realistic narratives of street life, the game of battling is still further enshrined in special status because it represents a central way in which the 'realness' or authenticity of a rapper (and his audience) is manifested. The broader American cultural narrative of authenticity has long been an important part of youth subculture, especially in the wake of the youth movements of the 1960s. These subcultures have indeed often been predicated largely on notions of authenticity, usually defined at least in part as rejection of some elements of the broader, mainstream, middle-class American culture championed by their elders. As social scientists interested in the 1960s counterculture have long noted (see, for example, Roszak 1969), much of the deviance of these cultural practices (e.g., sexual novelty, drug use) was aimed toward a transcending of technocratically created and enforced states of normalcy that, by their very nature, removed humans from the visionary possibilities of other kinds of

consciousness. Roszak is especially effective at separating this pursuit from narrowly political motivations and connecting it to broader interests in expanded possibilities for meaning. Authenticity, for the 1960s counterculture, meant rejecting broader social patterns of behavior when these were recognized as technocratic; that is, when they opposed the project of living in an honest and autonomous manner. Gangsta hip hop authenticity similarly rejects mainstream morals and social rules when these are seen as necessarily inconsistent with the honest 'realness' of the tragic cultural world in which it is situated. In gangsta rap and hip hop culture, authenticity means being 'the realest', or the one most in touch (through purportedly direct life experience) with the agonistic, tragic rules of the subculture—the one most able to face, affirm, and overcome suffering and to report it unflinchingly to others [2]. 'Real niggaz', as Jay-Z puts it in the song of the same name [3], 'do real things, On the road to riches and diamond rings', and these 'real things' can include such morally complex actions as the selling of drugs as a way out of poverty with the full knowledge that this necessarily involves the ruining of the lives of those addicted to those drugs and with full acceptance of the great personal risk (possible prison or death) involved in such activity. Shakur puts the matter well in the following prelude to the song 'Heartz of Men':

Now, on this ride there's gonna be some real muthafuckas
and there's gonna be some pussies
Now the real niggas gonna be the ones with money and bitches
The pussies are gonna be the niggas on the floor bleedin'
Now everybody keep your eyes on the prize
Cause the ride get tricky
See you got some niggas on your side
That say they're your friends
But in real life they your enemies
And then you got some muthafuckas that say they your enemies
But in real life they eyes is on your money
See the enemies will say they true
But in real life those niggas will be the snitches
It's a dirty game y'all
Y'all got ta be careful about who you fuck with
And who you don't fuck with
Cause the shit get wild y'all

'Realness' thus involves the capacity not only to understand that there are moral dilemmas of great complexity and seeming contradiction that cannot be escaped, but also a profound will to play and win (within the specified rules, whatever one thinks of them morally) at the 'dirty game'. Adam Krims (2000), pp. 70–80) has even suggested that an entire genre of rap music, which he calls 'reality rap' and which clearly in at least some ways overlaps with the genre I examine here, attempts to sonically encode this notion of authenticity, in an aural aesthetic he calls 'hardness', within the very musical structures themselves.

The white, middle-class youth in Donna Gaines's study found cultural power in narratives of authenticity very similar to those in gangsta rap. Satanteenism was embraced as part of a symbolic investment in the person of the outlaw/outcast who had been rejected by mainstream society (the society of the parents of the baby busters) but had nonetheless managed to command respect and fear from that mainstream through toughness and a rejection of its moral grounds. It seems entirely plausible to imagine that white, middle-class hip hop cultures find gangsta rap meaningful in parallel ways.

Michael Eric Dyson, in his discussion of Tupac Shakur's legacy in the black community, points, albeit inadvertently, to what I indicate in this article. He writes:

For many blacks over the age of forty [and, per his analysis, one should certainly include Dyson himself in this category he is discussing], Tupac represents the repudiation of ancient black values of hope and positive uplift that tied together black folk across geography and generation. His studied hopelessness—and he affirmed his depressive status by repeatedly declaring 'I'm hopeless'—and his downward-looking social glance only aggravated the generational warfare that looms large in black America. (Dyson 2001, p. 123)

We might argue that Dyson misunderstands tragic wisdom for 'hopelessness' but, despite his failure to understand the tragic cultural symbolism of gangsta hip hop, he points, albeit inadvertently, to the question of audience with which I opened the essay. In order to make good arguments about whether gangsta rap does or does not signify a rejection of 'positive uplift' and a 'downward-looking social glance', we must specify an audience. Dyson presumes a non-youthful black audience in his comments, hardly an audience likely to bring the same hermeneutical tools to the table as youth audiences, black or white. What he and that audience can see only as an embrace of 'hopelessness' is quite possibly seen otherwise, and in a perfectly consistent and nuanced manner, by at least a significant fraction of the members of that subculture's actual audience.

Notes

- [1] She notes that hardcore subcultures among these youth were explicitly concerned with politics, but they could be more or less neatly distinguished from metal and thrash audiences by a broad array of cultural differences (Gaines 1992, pp. 197–199).
- [2] This 'realness' should not necessarily be confused with a factual objectivity. As, for example, Dyson notes regarding Shakur, some of those most adept at the portrayal of authenticity (in the sense of adherence to the rules of the subculture) in fact had or have doubtful credentials as having actually lived the hard lives they discuss and represent. In other words, 'realness' can be and in fact sometimes is *invented*, so long as it conforms to the cultural narrative (and is not too clearly discovered by others in the subculture to be invented).
- [3] NWA earlier released a different song with the same title.

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