

“I SEE DEATH AROUND THE CORNER”: NIHILISM IN RAP MUSIC¹

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ABSTRACT: *Rap is one of the most salient music genres of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Gangsta rap, in particular, with its focus on urban street life, has become a dominant means of expression within contemporary African American adolescent culture. As such, it speaks directly to issues of identity, culture, violence, and nihilism—themes that permeate recent research on inner-city black communities. Mostly ethnographic in nature, this work describes how structural disadvantage, social isolation, and despair create a black youth culture, or street code, that influences adolescent behavior. The current work builds on the community literature by exploring how the street code is present not only on “the street” but also in rap music. It addresses two important questions: (1) To what extent does rap music contain elements of the street code—and particularly nihilism—identified by Anderson (1999) and others? (2) How do rappers experience and interpret their lives, and how do they respond to conditions in their communities? These questions are explored in a content analysis of over four hundred songs on rap albums from 1992 to 2000.*

Rap is one of the most salient music genres of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A form of hip-hop (Guevara 1996:50; Kelley 1996:117; Krims 2000: 12), rap music emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban black youth. When it first appeared, critics predicted a quick demise, but rap music flourished and is currently enjoying unprecedented success. Reactions to this success reflect the myriad opinions about what rap music is. Although critics denounce it as having “no place in our society” (Dan Quayle), rappers themselves portray their music as a blend of entertainment and education for the masses, the “CNN for black America” (Chuck D), “edutainment” (KRS-ONE), and “a creative outlet which can become like a newspaper that people read with their ears” (Queen Latifah). For some scholars, rappers represent black poets of the contemporary urban scene (Baker 1993:xi) who use music as a vehicle for telling the history of African American culture (Potter 1995:116). For others, rap music serves as an expressive artistic outlet for a marginalized urban social bloc (Smith 1997:345), a contemporary response to

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joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment (Smitherman 1997:5), and an art form that reflects the nuances, pathology, and most importantly, the resilience of America's black ghettos (Dawsey 1994). Still others see rap music as contradictory: it is at one and the same time a consciousness-raising, politically progressive, liberatory popular culture form and a commodified, exploited, sexist, and materialist popular culture form (Martinez 1997:273).

Regardless of how it is understood, critics, rappers, and scholars agree that rap has undergone significant transformations over the last few decades—from the carefree images of the 1970s and early 1980s, to the Afrocentric stance in the late 1980s, to gangsta rap today. With each transformation, rap music has remained a dominant means of expression within contemporary African American adolescent culture (Austin 1992; Baker 1993; Boyd 1997:38; Martinez 1997; Rose 1994; Toop 1991). Then and now, it provides a form of informal education for adolescents, one that extends far beyond the confines of the classroom and into the peer group (Powell 1991:245). As far as influence in the black community, it is argued that no group has as extensive an influence as rap artists in terms of their ability to capture the listening ear of black youth—not the black athlete, entertainer, politician, teacher, nor minister (Kitwana 1994:59–60).

As such, rap music speaks directly to issues of identity, culture, and violence, themes that permeate recent research on inner-city black communities (Anderson 1999; Bruce, Roscigno, and McCall 1998; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Sampson and Wilson 1995). Mostly ethnographic in nature, this work describes how structural disadvantage, social isolation, and despair have created a black youth culture or “street code” that influences adolescent behavior, particularly with respect to violence. This literature assumes that the street code is a product of neighborhood processes and has generally neglected additional sources such as rap music, which may reflect and reinforce street code norms.

The current work builds on the existing community literature by incorporating rap music as a central aspect of popular culture in the inner city today and by exploring how the street code is present not only on “the street” but also in rap music. Through a content analysis of over four hundred songs on rap albums from 1992 to 2000, the study addresses a number of important questions. First, to what extent does gangsta rap contain elements of the street code identified by Anderson (1999) and others; that is, how is the street code manifested in the lyrics? Although elements such as respect, violence, and objectification of women, among others, are identified and briefly discussed, this article focuses on one key dimension of the code that has received little attention in the literature—nihilism. Second, how do rappers, many of whom come from inner-city neighborhoods, experience and interpret their lives, and how do they respond to the conditions in their communities? Before addressing these questions, I first discuss gangsta rap and describe the larger societal and community-level contexts in which the street code and this genre of music have emerged.

GANGSTA RAP MUSIC

What rappers know, scholars recognize, and critics often fail to see is that themes of rap music are quite varied, ranging from Afrocentric community building to

support for liberation struggles and political prisoners, from life in the ghetto to reminiscing about the good old days, from dancing and partying to racism and drug dealing. Kitwana (1994:32) identifies three rap genres—recreational, conscious, sex-violence—whereas Krims (2000:55) classifies four—party, mack, jazz/bohemian, reality—based on the style of the music tracks, Mcing or flow, and the topics typically dealt with. In addition to varied themes, rap music has been produced from multiple points of origin and with distinct inflections of geographic place, class identity, ethnic representation, and urban and rural differences. Rap music also has been stylistically diverse.

Rap has undergone transformations in the last two decades. One of the most significant occurred in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s with the emergence of what is commonly referred to as “gangsta rap.”² Distinctive for its descriptive storytelling laid over funk samples, gangsta rap departed from earlier rap forms that were often characterized as message-oriented, political, or socially conscious (Boyd 1997:39, 58–59, 66–67; Forman 2002:183–84; Martinez 1997; Perkins 1996:19). Since some of the early pioneers were gang members, gangsta rap arose, in part, from the life experiences of the rappers themselves, and the lyrics described gang life or, more generally, life in the ghetto from the perspective of a criminal (Boyd 1997:42, 73; Krims 2000:70).

Although gangsta rap themes vary, few are inconsistent with Kelley’s (1996) assertion of gangsta rap as “ghettocentric”: “The construction of the ghetto as a living nightmare and gangstas as products of that nightmare has given rise to what I call a new ‘ghettocentric’ identity in which the specific class, race, and gendered experiences in late-capitalist urban centers coalesce to create a new identity—nigga. ‘Nigga’ is not merely another word for black; it encompasses a specific class, spatial, and to a larger degree, gendered subject position.” To be a “real nigga” is to be from the ghetto, and by linking their identity to the ghetto instead of just to skin color, gangsta rappers acknowledge the limitations of racial politics—black middle-class reformism as well as black nationalism (p. 136; see also Boyd 1997: 17–18, 31).³ Scholars agree that rap music’s agenda since its inception has shifted largely from a generic concern for chronicling the “black” experience to one specifically about the black underclass in the ghetto (Smith 1997:346).

Not surprisingly, gangsta rap is considered the most controversial style of the rap genre. Critics and scholars raise issue with its misogyny, nihilism, and excessive use of profanity (Kelley 1996:147; Kitwana 1994, 2002) and despair, arguing that the music has wandered too far from its roots. How and why did gangsta rap emerge? What are its origins? Before examining how the street code and nihilism are represented in rap music, it is first necessary to understand how and why gangsta rap emerged, which requires considering the larger social-structural context of the time. The connection between social-structural conditions and gangsta rap is explored in the following section.

UNDERSTANDING THE EMERGENCE OF GANGSTA RAP

Societal Conditions

Those who study rap music describe a unique urban youth culture in America (Smitherman 1997:3), a hip-hop generation or group born between 1965 and 1984

who share common lived experiences and have a common understanding of coming of age in a post-civil rights era (Kitwana 2002). Important changes in American society since the late 1960s—in the form of economic restructuring and a renewed “get tough on crime” approach—have significantly altered the landscape of black America. Scholars acknowledge changes in societal and neighborhood structure as fundamental for understanding rap’s evolution and the development of gangsta rap (Boyd 1997:35; Forman 2002:41, 45; Kitwana 2002; Perkins 1996).

We cannot ignore the ties of West Coast gangsta rap to the streets of Los Angeles’ black working class communities where it originated. The generation who came of age in the 1980s during the Reagan-Bush era were products of devastating structural changes in the urban economy that date back at least to the late 1960s. While the city as a whole experienced unprecedented growth, the communities of Watts and Compton faced increased economic displacement, factory closures, and an unprecedented deepening of poverty. (Kelley 1996:122)

One significant change over the last several decades has been the economic restructuring that has occurred in the United States. Rapid expansion in technology and the relocation of jobs outside the country have contributed to the decline of a manufacturing-oriented economy and the rise of a service-oriented economy (Kelley 1996; Wilson 1987, 1996). This shift has produced a growing demand for highly skilled workers and a decrease in demand for low-skilled workers—such as those previously employed in chemical, steel, rubber, auto, and meat-packing factories—who lack the skills needed in the new economy. Concurrent with these shifts in metropolitan areas, technological advances in the agricultural industry and the investment of capital into automation and computerization made many laborers in the South obsolete.

Although scholars recognize that these changes have affected the general population, they note that they have particularly affected uneducated young black males in deleterious ways—by increasing joblessness, poverty, and family disruption in the inner cities, by fueling the out-migration of middle-class blacks to the suburbs, and by widening the gap in wages between low-skilled and college-educated workers. By the 1980s, young blacks who lacked education demanded by these new high-tech jobs had few places to turn within the mainstream economy aside from minimum-wage jobs created by the service sector. Unlike working-class jobs of the previous generation, most low-skilled jobs lacked the wages and benefits that afforded workers in the 1970s a middle-class existence (Tonry 1995). The income earned by today’s “working poor,” especially in inner cities, is often inadequate for decent housing or child care (Ehrenreich 2001; Kitwana 2002; Tonry 1995).

But these changes alone do not account for the emergence of the street code or the evolution of gangsta rap, for dire economic conditions in inner cities existed well before this time. Concurrent with these structural shifts, and possibly of greater importance, criminal justice policy since 1980 has become increasingly punitive, with each administration calling for tougher penalties, mandatory penalties, lengthier sentences, more prisons, and reduced habeas corpus rights. Exemplary of such policy, in 1993 the U.S. Senate passed a \$23 billion crime bill, which, among other

things, made being a member of certain types of gangs a federal offense and expanded the death penalty to cover fifty-two additional offenses. The bill also classified street crimes involving firearms as a federal offense and contained the "three strikes and you're out" provision, which calls for mandatory sentences for persons convicted of three felonies. The war on drugs, with a budget of only \$1 billion in 1981 but \$13.4 billion in 1993, perhaps has been the most punitive policy. Mandatory penalties for drug crimes have proliferated and are now the harshest in the nation's history. Collectively, the various laws have had severe consequences: (1) The United States has been engaged in an unprecedented imprisonment binge (between 1980 and 1998 the prison population increased from 329,821 to 1,302,019—a rise of 295 percent) and now incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country in the world (Austin and Irwin 2001:1). (2) Federal and state budgets have shifted public expenditures from other social services to crime control (Tonry 1995). (3) Racism and the systematic oppression of minority groups, especially young African American men, has been legitimized and institutionalized in the criminal justice system (Chambliss 1995:236).

Concerning the latter, statistics detail the extent to which these policies have adversely affected minorities. Between 1979 and 1990, the percentage of blacks among those admitted to state and federal prisons grew from 39 to 53 percent (since 1980, the number of blacks in prison has tripled) (Tonry 1995:49). Incarceration rates for blacks in 1990 (1,860 per 100,000) were nearly seven times higher than those for whites (289 per 100,000) (Jankowski 1992). And one study reported the following: almost one in three (32.2 percent) African American men ages twenty to twenty-nine is either in prison, in jail, or on probation or parole on any given day (Mauer and Huling 1995). These disparities continue to worsen; the incarceration rate for blacks today (3,437) still far exceeds that for whites (450) (U.S. Department of Justice 2002:500).

Even more problematic are arrest and incarceration statistics for drug offenses fueled by the war on drugs. Although the absolute number of drug arrests grew from the 1970s to the 1990s, the percentage of black drug arrests rose most sharply. For example, between 1985 and 1989 the number of black arrests more than doubled from 210,298 to 452,574, whereas the number of white arrests grew only by 27 percent (U.S. Department of Justice 2002). Drug arrests are a principal reason that the proportion of blacks in prison has risen so rapidly: in 1926, the first year that the race of prison admissions was recorded on a national basis, only 21 percent of all admissions were African American, but by 1970 that figure grew to 39 percent, and by 1996 it grew even further to 51 percent (Austin and Irwin 2001:7).

These statistics indicate to some that, although laws are applied to all in theory, they are in fact applied in a discriminatory fashion against poor minorities (Chambliss 1995:250; Tonry 1995). Observations of the routine practices of police departments and prosecutorial practices expose the institutionalized racism resulting from the expansion of the crime control industry (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993). Police departments across the nation have policed the urban underclass ghetto with a vigilance that would create political revolution were the same tactics and policies implemented in middle-class communities (Chambliss 1995:250). Indeed, one study

of Washington, D.C., found that residents of both white and black middle-class communities reported fewer instances of police misconduct—unjustified street stops of citizens, verbal abuse, use of excessive force—compared to lower-class black neighborhoods primarily because the well-off and powerful residents made the police aware that there would be repercussions for misconduct (Weitzer 1999:841). With respect to discriminatory law enforcement, Tonry (1995:7) charges, “Unless America can devise ways to make its crime control policies less destructive of poor black males and poor black communities, there can be no solution to the problems of the black underclass.” Deindustrialization and particularly a renewed “get tough on crime” approach have had direct consequences for the (re)structuring of inner-city communities over the last several decades, as discussed below.

Neighborhood Conditions

Concentrated disadvantage, or the combined effect of poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and isolation from mainstream America, defines the neighborhood context for residents of black inner-city communities. A key feature of these communities is the limited opportunity structure available for residents to obtain the types of social status and roles available to youth in other environments (Boyd 1997:34). Few opportunities exist for broader participation in community life (e.g., after-school groups, volunteer organizations, supervised athletics), but illegitimate avenues abound. For many impoverished young black males, the opportunity for dealing drugs is literally just outside the door (Anderson 1999:114) and represents a viable “job” option in the face of limited meaningful employment (Kitwana 2002:39). I am not suggesting that impoverished blacks bypass hard work as a prerequisite for success in life. As Kelley (1996) explains, the economics of the Bronx and other similarly designated “ghetto” communities are not based on chronic impoverishment alone; they are also brimming with hard workers whose labor, reinvestment, and community commitments are beyond reproach (see also Newman 1999). But the demand for economic and social success, coupled with limited avenues and numerous illegitimate avenues by which to attain it, creates a situation unparalleled in other communities. And drugs contribute to the equation not only by increasing illegitimate opportunities for residents but by creating neighborhood battles for the control over markets, where violence is used as the basis for social control (George 1998:109).

Tense police–community relations further exacerbate these problems. Ironically, the communities most in need of police protection—disadvantaged black communities—are also those in which many residents view the police with the most ambivalence. This attitude stems, in part, from a recognition that color counts as a mark of suspicion used as a predicate for action—stopping, questioning, patting down, arresting, and so forth. Such practices cause residents to avoid the police, to assume dishonesty on the part of officers, and to teach others that such reactions are prudent lessons of survival on the streets (Anderson 1999; Kennedy 1997:153; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003). In an age where race is used for purposes of calculating suspiciousness, it is no surprise that residents of poor black communi-

ties distrust the police. Unwarranted police stops, verbal and physical abuse, and racial bias toward residents of disadvantaged communities continue to strain minority residents' relations with the police.

Scholars have documented the disparities that exist between black and white communities in poverty levels (Sampson and Wilson 1995), employment opportunities (Wilson 1996), wages (Quadagno 1994), education (Anyon 1997), housing (Squires 1994), and health care (Bullard 1996), and findings from qualitative studies echo these disparities. One needs only read the rich descriptions of black and white neighborhoods in works by Anderson (1999), Kozol (1992, 1995), Macleod (1987), and Sullivan (1989) to understand the drastic differences between many black and white communities. And although black middle-class communities are better off than their lower-class counterparts, Pattillo-McCoy (1999) finds that almost half of the black middle class is concentrated in the lower-middle-class region, that the black middle class is distinguished by its close proximity to the black working poor, and that middle-class African Americans do not perform as well as similarly situated whites on standardized tests, are less likely to marry and more likely to have a child without being married, and are less likely to be working. Even at higher levels of income, occupation, and education, black families on average have drastically lower levels of wealth than similar white families (Conley 1999; Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

In sum, changing societal conditions and punitive criminal justice policy have led to extreme concentrated disadvantage in, and the isolation of, black inner-city communities. To some, these conditions represent "previously unseen challenges in African American life" (Kitwana 1994:45). This is the context in which the street code has emerged.

NEIGHBORHOOD SUBCULTURE AND THE STREET CODE

In response to societal and neighborhood conditions, black youth in disadvantaged communities have created a substitute social order governed by their own code—a street code—and rituals of authenticity (Anderson 1999; Forman 2002:343; Henderson 1996; Kitwana 2002; Perkins 1996:20). This social order reflects the sub-cultural locus of interests that emerges from pervasive race and class inequality and the social isolation of poor black communities (Anderson 1999; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Kubrin and Wadsworth 2003). Residents often derive for themselves a paradigm for interpreting a different world than that contained in the paradigm of the dominant culture (Henderson 1996:325). This black youth culture (Kitwana 2002:xiv) subsumes a number of powerful conduct norms and governs public social relations among residents, particularly young men and women. It is important to stress that the structural conditions discussed above generate the subculture so that cultural differences are themselves adaptations to larger structural inequality (Krivo and Peterson 1996). Although this article focuses on one aspect of the street code—nihilism—all elements are discussed, given their interconnectedness.

At the heart of street culture is the issue of respect, defined as being treated right or being granted the deference one deserves (Anderson 1999:33). In the inner city, respect often forms the core of the person's self-esteem, particularly when

alternative avenues of self-expression may be closed. Respect and honor are especially prized among males who have few "personal accomplishments or cannot draw on valued social roles to protect their self-esteem" (Horowitz 1983:81). A principal way to command respect is to develop a reputation for being willing and able to fight by creating a self-image based on "juice" (Anderson 1999:72). At the top of the street hierarchy is the "crazy," "wild," or "killer" social identity (Wilkinson 2001:246), an identity that projects one's capacity for violence when the situation requires it. As such, the gun becomes a symbol of power and a remedy for disputes. One study found that, in some cases, youth created altercations with the sole purpose of building "juice" and to be known as having a reputation for being quick-tempered (Anderson 1999:72). In another study, robbery situations provided young males with opportunities to impress their peers and upgrade status (Wilkinson 2001:243). In a third study, youth from inner-city New York communities claimed they used violence to gain prestige and personal security (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998). Because residents must work to create a violent social identity, they quickly learn the value of having a "name."

Material objects also play an important role in establishing self-image and gaining respect. The street code calls for the bold display of the latest status-symbol clothing and accessories, a look that loudly proclaims that the wearer has overcome the financial difficulties faced by others on the street corner (Jacobs and Wright 1999:156). Jackets, sneakers, gold jewelry, expensive firearms, and nice cars reflect not just taste but also a willingness to possess things that may require defending (Anderson 1999:73).

When one is disrespected, violent retaliation is warranted, if not expected. Whether in a fight or during a verbal confrontation, if one person gets the better of the other, payback is imminent (Anderson 1999:79). A study of extremely disadvantaged communities in St. Louis found that retaliatory homicides are more common in such neighborhoods and that, far from being an isolated, individual affair, retaliatory violence was collectively tolerated, endorsed, and rewarded by other residents as a means to resolve disputes (Kubrin and Weitzer 2003).

Masculinity is also a crucial component of the street code. Whereas middle-class males often demonstrate their manhood through the pursuit of legitimate prestige structures (e.g., providing for their families or making a good living), poorer inner-city males seek recognition within the confines of their circumstances, which often means within their peer groups (Bruce et al. 1998:45). Peer groups offer these young men a rare opportunity to gain and maintain status and self-respect (Messerschmidt 1993), most frequently by engaging in dangerous behaviors but also by boasting about their sexual exploits, maintaining independence from conjugal ties, and deriding conventional family life (Anderson 1999:147). The street code presents promiscuity as a virtue, and sex is an important symbol of local social status. In the process, women become sexually objectified.

To the young man, the woman becomes, in the most profound sense, a sexual object. Her body and mind are the object of a sexual game to be won for his personal aggrandizement. Status goes to the winner and sex is prized as a testament not of love but of control over another human being. The goal of the sexual conquests is to make a fool of the young woman. (Anderson 1999:150)

In essence, according to the street code, the more women a young man has sex with the more esteem accrues to him.

The conditions in extremely disadvantaged communities have led scholars to cite a growing sense of nihilism in black youth culture, an outgrowth of living in an environment filled with violence and limited opportunities (Boyd 1997:67; Bruce et al. 1998:44; Kitwana 2002:126). As African Americans grow up in distressed communities, they become cognizant of the constraints of their existence, either through first-hand experience of material constraints, such as the lack of educational and job opportunities (Bruce et al. 1998; Majors and Billson 1992), or through direct observation of family members and friends struggling to make it (Anderson 1999). Real and perceived powerlessness shapes social psychological well-being and can lead to anger, frustration, and despair. An important part of this worldview is a sense of resignation and acceptance of the world as it is. "One must understand that some young people bereft of hope for the future have made their peace with death and talk about planning their own funerals. . . . The high death rate among their peers keeps many from expecting to live beyond age twenty five" (Anderson 1999:135). Yet as stated earlier, many who adopt the street code also express a lack of fear of death, a notion that dying "ain't no big deal" as a way to express toughness. Not fearing death makes it easier to convey the message that you fear no one.

Despite the strong presence of street culture, most inner-city residents are "decent" (Anderson 1999:36), law-abiding persons who value education, hard work, and a crime-free community. These residents do not support the street code. Unfortunately, there are often serious consequences for not abiding by the code. Since their efforts to achieve upward mobility tend to be viewed as "disrespecting" their own community, "decent" people, particularly children, often struggle to advance themselves (p. 65). Even more problematic, those unwilling to adopt at least some street norms are vulnerable to physical attack. One study found that those who did not subscribe to the code were considered "fair game" for attacks and robberies motivated by the need to restate the dominant hierarchy and as punishment for not living up to group norms (Wilkinson 2001:249). Such retaliation for selling out underscores the deep alienation present in parts of the inner city.

In short, many youth must learn to negotiate the street world by building a social identity, projecting a reputation, and developing a protective peer group in the neighborhood. Increasingly, the street serves as the "classroom" for violent "schooling" and learning about manhood (Wilkinson 2001:250). In the past, black youth were more likely to derive values and identity from traditional community institutions such as the family, church, and school. Today, the influence of these traditional purveyors of black culture is diminished (Anderson 1999; Kitwana 2002). As some cease to identify with the school environment and drop out, and as structural changes in society undermine the role of traditional "old heads" (Anderson 1999) in disadvantaged communities, the street, the peer group, and increasingly rap music are often viewed as major forces transmitting culture to the current generation of black American youth.⁴

This is not to suggest that the street code, or culture for that matter, is deterministic; likewise, I do not argue that rap music causes certain behaviors such as vio-

lence. Listeners interpret music in multiple ways, and rap and its lyrics are appropriated and embedded into specific individual, familial, and localized points of reference (Forman 2002:23–24). Rap music is a “localized form of cultural expression” (Bennett 1999a:77; 1999b), and Rose (1964) 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; see also Boyd 1997:73–74).

Diversity of reception and localization may mean that listeners reject the lyrics, resulting in disaffiliation, ambivalence, and disengagement with rap music (Negus and Velazquez 2002:141). That media content has multiple meanings and that audiences actively construct this meaning suggest no direct relationship between music and behavior. The street code and rap lyrics do not compel youth to act, but as will be demonstrated below, they provide an interpretive resource that can be drawn upon to understand as well as justify social identity and behavior.

DATA, METHODS, AND ANALYSIS

To document street code themes in rap music, I identified platinum rap albums (those that sold over 1 million copies) between 1992 and 2000 ($n = 130$). Although the focus is on gangsta rap, general rap albums were selected because they typically mix genres (Krims 2000:87). Songs that contain street code elements would have been left out of the analysis had I only included gangsta rap albums. I selected platinum albums to increase the likelihood that the music had reached a wide segment of the population.

The 1992 to 2000 time 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 has become excessively commercialized (Kitwana 1994:23; Krims 2000:71; Smith 1997:346; Watkins 2001:382). Critics note that the violence and gangsterism in today’s rap music has been exaggerated as a marketing ploy by the record companies. Watkins (2001:389) notes 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. Yet 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 grassroots expression (Bennett 1999a:86). “Rap retains its close ties to the poorest and least represented members of the black community” (Rose 1994:183), and 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). The lure of rap is precisely its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance, and little in rap’s commercial position contradicts this stance (Rose 1994:19). Still, rap music cannot be fully severed from the ties of the record industry, a fact that has implications for analyzing the lyrics. As Keyes (2002:4) reminds us, “Lyrics from rappers

range from truthful accounts to exaggerated fantasies"; and Boyd (1997:69) contends, "[Gangsta] culture is composed of fictional as well as real-life occurrences. . . . It is both real and imaginary, often at the same time." To minimize the influence of the record industry, however, I end the analysis in 2000. As such, the selected albums do not represent all rap music but are representative of the 1992 to 2000 time period.

To identify the sample, I first obtained a list of all albums that went platinum between 1992 and 2000 from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). The RIAA is the premier source for comprehensive market data on music trends in America. The association compiles, analyzes, and reports on the quantity and value of recorded music shipped into market channels. I then went through the list and identified rap albums (excluding movie soundtrack and compilation albums), using the Web site ARTISTdirect (<http://www.artistdirect.com/>). Established in 1994, ARTISTdirect is a comprehensive online network of resources that provides, among other things, detailed information about artists/groups of all music genres. I was able to type in the name of each artist/group, and the Web site classified the artists'/groups' precise music genre (e.g., alternative rap, battle rap, conscious rap, crossover rap, dirty south rap, gangsta rap, etc.). This resource was used along with my personal knowledge to select rap albums.

There were 1,922 songs on the 130 albums. I drew a simple random sample of 632 songs, roughly one-third of the sample. The coding occurred in two stages: First, I listened to a song in its entirety while reading the printed lyrics to determine what the song was about. Second, I listened to the song again and coded each line to determine whether the street code elements described earlier were present: (1) respect, (2) willingness to fight or use violence, (3) material wealth, (4) violent retaliation, (5) objectification of women, and (6) nihilism. If a song discussed issues of respect, for example, it scored a 1 for that dimension; otherwise, it scored a 0. This was done for each theme. I coded the data conservatively, identifying themes only where it was clear that the lyrics reflected the street code. I consulted the *The Rap Dictionary* (<http://www.rapdict.org/>), a comprehensive online dictionary of rap and hip-hop terms, in cases where I was unsure about the meaning of a word or phrase. When lyrics referenced more than one theme at a time, each scored a 1 to create overlapping rather than mutually exclusive categories. Finally, I scored as 0 the relatively few cases where lyrics criticized the street code, because I only wanted statements that endorsed the code.

To address issues of data reliability, I performed a test of intercoder reliability. An independent researcher identified a random subset of the subsample ($n = 64$, 16 percent of the final sample) and coded the cases. Agreement percentages between myself and the researcher vary slightly by theme but overall suggest 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.

Although all themes were coded in the data, the focus of this article is on only one—nihilism. I chose to concentrate on nihilism for three important reasons. First, the scholarly literature on identity and culture in inner-city communities focuses almost exclusively on other street code dimensions, most notably respect and violence (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Sampson and

Wilson 1995; compare to Bruce et al. 1998). Even Anderson's (1999) work devotes the majority of attention to these topics. This focus is logical given the primary role respect and violence occupy, but other dimensions such as nihilism have not been fully investigated and merit attention. Second, the scholarly literature on rap music has been most concerned with profanity, violence, and misogyny (Baker 1993; Kelley 1996; Kitwana 2002), also not discussing nihilism in a satisfactory way (see Boyd 1997, chapter 4, for an exception). Third, and most importantly, the quantitative analysis and qualitative review of the data suggest that nihilism is a relatively frequent and important theme in rap music. During the coding of the songs, nihilism emerged as a key theme, and a number of subthemes materialized from the data. I anticipated that respect, violence, and misogyny would saturate rap music, but I was surprised to discover how pervasive nihilism was in the songs. The goal of this article is to investigate this underexamined topic and to explore how nihilism is portrayed in rap music, with implications for research on identity, culture, and violence in inner-city black communities.

The first analyses are quantitative and describe the occurrence of each theme in the sample. The second analyses are qualitative and specifically examine how nihilism is represented in rap music. Using content analysis, I looked for instances of nihilism in the lyrics and wrote up the results by selecting representative quotes that illustrated that particular dimension of the code. While coding, I looked for evidence of attitudes such 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. Because subthemes related to nihilism emerged during the process of coding the lyrics, I carefully searched for additional meanings in the data and incorporated them into the findings.

RESULTS

The findings are based on a sample size of 403 songs (64 percent of the total sample), because after about song 350 during the course of coding, I no longer encountered new aspects of the street code themes in the lyrics. I coded another 50 songs to verify that I had reached saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967:111). In all, 1,588 minutes of music were coded for the analyses.

As expected, each theme was clearly accounted for in the lyrics, albeit to varying degrees. Although not the most common, nihilism was referenced in 25 percent of the songs. More importantly, in these songs nihilism was discussed throughout the entire song as opposed to just in passing. Respect, the most common theme, was present in 67.5 percent of songs, whereas violence and material wealth were also frequently referenced—in 64.8 and 57.8 percent of the songs, respectively. Mention of violent retaliation occurred in 35 percent of the songs. Finally, only 22.3 percent of the songs had references to the objectification of women despite the common assumption that misogyny pervades rap music.

The qualitative review of the data suggests at least three subthemes of nihilism in rap music: (1) bleak surroundings with little hope, (2) pervasive violence in the ghetto, and (3) preoccupation with death and dying. The subthemes can be differentiated based on whether they represent structural, objective neighborhood con-

ditions (bleak surroundings with little hope, or pervasive violence in the ghetto, for example), or subjective cultural responses to such conditions (preoccupation with death and dying). Each subtheme appeared frequently in the songs where nihilism was present. The discussion below includes thirty-seven direct quotes from thirty-one songs by nineteen different rappers. These quotes do not exhaust the population of nihilism examples but are representative of that population.

Bleak Surroundings with Little Hope

As suggested earlier, economic restructuring and punitive criminal justice initiatives have worsened conditions in the inner city during the last few decades. In their songs, rappers frequently make reference to the increasingly harsh conditions of what they call "the ghetto." In "Things Done Changed," Notorious B.I.G. (1994) contrasts life in the ghetto, then and now, highlighting the limited opportunities available to residents.

If I wasn't in the rap game
 I'd probably have a key knee deep in the crack game
 Because the streets is a short stop
 Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot
 Shit, it's hard being young from the slums
 Eatin' five cent gums not knowin' where your meals comin' from
 And now the shit's gettin' crazier and major
 Kids younger than me, they got the Sky Grand pagers
 Damn, what happened to the summertime cookouts?
 Every time I turn around a nigga gettin' took out
 Shit, my momma got cancer in her breast
 Don't ask me why I'm motherfuckin' stressed, things done changed

Likewise in "Thangs Change," Too \$hort (1995) focuses on the deteriorating and dangerous conditions of the present-day ghetto.

I tell you life just ain't what it used to be
 Between you and me, exclusively
 Everybody's changed, we're losing our minds
 The government won't help cause they refuse to find
 A solution to the problem of the inner streets
 It's a shame what our kids are beginning to be
 Pregnant teenagers, young gun slangers
 There ain't no love, there ain't nothing but anger
 I know kids who went to school together
 Now they all grown up, tryin' to kill each other
 Shootouts on the playground is where it goes down
 But back in the day, we rode the merry-go-round

According to rappers, these changes are responsible for the increasingly hopeless conditions of the ghetto, and they often paint a bleak portrait of life in the streets, referencing images of drugs, violence, prostitution, and liquor stores on every corner. In "Streets Raised Me," Mobb Deep (1999) asks listeners to "Vision the canvas, I paint a picture."

Similar to Ernie Barnes [a well-known African American painter], nigga
 But mines is more ghetto, more guns
 More drugs, mostly thugs
 Dark blocks, with street lamps shot the fuck out
 Park benches broke, a nigga stretched out
 Jumped off the roof to his death, it's real
 Handball walls displayed with R.I.P murals

Jay-Z (1997) describes the Brooklyn neighborhood where he grew up in "Where I'm From."

I'm from where they cross-over and clap boards
 Lost Jehovah in place of rap lords, listen
 I'm up the block, round the corner, and down the street
 From where the pimps, prostitutes, and the drug lords meet
 Niggas get lost for weeks in the streets, twisted off weed
 And no matter the weather, niggas know how to draw heat [fire their guns]

In addition to growing poverty and limited opportunities, these rappers describe how the ghetto is more dangerous than in years past. Many rappers recognize that jobs are scarce and that residents of the inner city have few legitimate opportunities to make a decent living. As a consequence, rappers describe how they have to "do dirt" and "hustle," as in 2Pac's (1995) "Heavy in the Game":

I'm just a young black male, cursed since birth
 Had to turn to crack sales, if worse came to worse
 Headed for them packed jails, or maybe it's a hearse
 My only way to stack mail [make money], is out here doin' dirt
 Made my decisions do or die, been hustlin' since junior high
 No time for askin' why, gettin' high, gettin' mine
 Put away my nine [9-mm handgun], cause these times call
 for four-five [45 magnum]
 Cause life is hell and everybody dies

A similar sentiment is echoed by Mo Thugs (1997) in "Ghetto Bluez," where a female rapper explains how the "ghetto blues done got a sista faded," and to survive, she must "get on the hustle":

Gotta make this come up on the real, since tired of strugglin'
 Ghetto life showin' me no love
 But givin' me reason to make quick moves on somethin'
 Gotta hold my own, but it's hard as hell
 Tryin' to stay afloat in the heart of it all
 So for myself it's the way I go
 I gotta do what gotta be done to make it in these hard times
 Strugglin's a mother when you gotta wonder
 Can I provide for mine?
 Look at my predicament, who's gonna help this sister in need?
 Can't put trust in the system
 So I gotta hustle these streets for my cheese [cash]

Hustling in the ghetto is commonplace (Anderson 1999:109; Boyd 1997:14; Bruce et al. 1998:44) and often is referred to as the "street mentality" by rappers, includ-

ing Big Punisher (1998) who flatly states: "Fuck it! I'd rather sell reefer than do pizza delivery."

Limited opportunities, heightened poverty, rising violence, and living the hustler lifestyle takes its toll on rappers, who describe the stress and strain they experience on a daily basis. Notorious B.I.G. (1999) rapped in "I Really Want to Show You,"

I know how it feel to wake up fucked up
 Pockets broke as hell, another rock to sell
 People look at you like youse the user
 Selling drugs to all the losers, mad Buddha [marijuana] abuser
 But they don't know about your stress-filled day
 Baby on the way, mad bills to pay
 That's why you drink Tanqueray, so you can reminisce
 And wish you wasn't livin' so devilish, shit

A young rapper making a guest appearance on Too \$hort's (1995) "Thangs Change" describes the stress and strain of living in the ghetto from a child's point of view:

It's kinda hard comin' up as a youngster
 Gotta deal with the roof that I'm under
 Even though my mom's got it hard
 My daddy passed away, now I'm stuck without a father
 But times have changed bro
 I never ever seen Santa Claus comin' through the ghetto

Worsening conditions, bleak surroundings with little hope, limited opportunities, and stress-filled days explain why Jay-Z's (1998) remake of the familiar Annie tune, "Hard Knock Life," is known by all as the official ghetto anthem.

Pervasive Violence in the Ghetto

According to rappers, the one thing more prevalent in the ghetto than poverty, family disruption, and limited opportunities is violence and death. Rappers, like many African American youth, are exposed to violence at an early age (Bruce et al. 1998:44). Themes of death and dying, therefore, pervade rap music, which is evident in the song titles alone—"I See Death around the Corner" (2Pac 1995), "So Much Death" (B.G. 1999), "Till We Dead and Gone" (Master P 1998), "Killin' Fields" (Method Man 1998), "Killafornia" [instead of California] (Cypress Hill 1995), "Mo Murda" (Bone Thugs-N-Harmony 1995), "Murder Was the Case" (Snoop Dogg 1993), "Ready to Die" (Notorious B.I.G. 1994). In the ghetto, untimely death is such a common occurrence that rappers often begin their songs with a dedication to someone who has died, as in Notorious B.I.G.'s (1997) "Miss You":

Dedicating this to my nigga O
 We miss you nigga
 Goin' out to all the niggas that died in the struggle
 Word up, shit is real in the field

In addition to honoring his friend, Notorious B.I.G. reminds listeners that "shit is real in the field," or that ghetto life is a continuous struggle. Many songs are dedi-

cated to a friend or family member that has died. In these songs, rappers tell childhood stories or reminisce about what things were like before the death of their friend/loved one. This example is from Master P's (1997) "I Really Miss My Homies":

I used to hang with my boy, even slang [sell drugs] with my boy
 Used to bang with my boy, god damn I miss my boy
 We started like youngstas in the park throwin' birds [kilos of cocaine]
 In your hearse, damn it's sad to see my nigga in the dirt

While most rappers acknowledge that violence and death in the ghetto are pervasive, some explicitly detail the violent and deadly conditions that residents face on a daily basis. Rappers describe environments where wearing a bulletproof vest is a must and a day without hearing gunshots is the exception, not the rule:

Fuck it, niggas goin' wild
 Every night they shoot, it's like Beirut
 Maybe you should get a Teflon vest for your chest
 Anytime stepping through my hood
 But that'll do you no good
 One slug to your face, no haste
 You're gettin' smoked like wood
 Nasty nigga bloody pumps face flat
 On the concrete, here comes the white sheet
 Mr. Coroner, cocked with some yellow tape
 But, the murderers escape
 (Dr. Dre 1992, "Lyrical Gangbang")

Every single day it's a test, wear a bulletproof vest
 And still a nigga stressin' over death
 When everyday it's another death, with every breath,
 It's a constant threat, so watch yo' step!
 My memories bring me misery, and life is hard
 In the ghetto it's insanity, I can't breathe
 Got me thinkin', what do Hell got?
 Cause I done suffered so much, I'm feelin' shell-shocked
 And drive-by's an everyday thang
 I done lost too many homies to this motherfuckin' game
 (2Pac 1995, "Lord Knows")

In one song—appropriately titled "Bang Bang" (Dr Dre 1999)—where gunshots ring in the background throughout the song, the artist describes a chilling scenario in his neighborhood:

Late nights is full of lead that whistles as it goes by
 Murder arrives, anytime
 Bullets take flight when the fo'five [45-caliber gun] ignites
 Some hearts skip a beat, some get blew out, and never re-light
 On every corner, Cali [California] niggas are dumpin'
 You'll be shakin' your soul loose from the box at the coroner's
 Makin' death not so foreign to ya
 Niggas got Rugers and M-14s with enough

Ammo to leave an armored truck Swiss cheese
I've learned to stay away from house parties

The chorus of the song? "Everywhere I go, all I ever seem to hear is BANG BANG!! BANG BANG!!"

In some cases, rappers describe death as it is happening, either for a friend as in "Tearz" (Wu-Tang Clan, 1993),

I saw the blood, all over the hot concrete
I picked him up, then I held him by his head
His eyes shut, that's when I knew he was . . .
Aw man! How do I say goodbye?

or for the rapper himself as in "Murder Was the Case" (Snoop Dogg 1993):

As I look up at the sky
My mind starts trippin', a tear drops my eye
My body temperature falls
I'm shakin' and they breakin' tryin' to save the Dogg
Pumpin' on my chest and I'm screamin'
I stop breathin', damn I see demons
Dear God I wonder can you save me
I can't die my boo boo's [girlfriend/wife] 'bout to have my baby

Later in the song we learn that God spares Snoop Dogg, who promises never again to get into trouble. By the end of the song, however, Snoop Dogg resumes living dangerously.

Rappers use a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the pervasiveness of death. Some dream of a better life, as in "Fantastic Voyage" (Coolio, 1994):

I'm tryin' to find a place where I can live my life and
Maybe eat some steak with my beans and rice, a
Place where my kids can play outside
Without living in fear of a drive-by
And even if I get away from them drive-by killers
I still got to worry 'bout those snitch-ass niggas
I keep on searchin', I keep on lookin'
But niggas are the same from Watts to Brooklyn

More commonly, however, rappers describe how they use drugs and alcohol to cope with all the violence, death, and despair that surrounds them:

Wonderin' why the real niggas always the ones to die
So I just smoke my weed and try to clear my mind
(Master P 1997, "I Miss My Homies")

My gateway to hell seems like it's constantly open
The reaper is callin' so I'm constantly smoking
C-Murder ain't gonna die in vain
My ghetto ties got me living my life in pain
(C-Murder 1998, "Ghetto Ties")

I take a shot of Hennessy now I'm strong enough to face the madness
Nickel bag full of sess weed laced with hash

Phone calls from my niggas on the other side
 Two childhood friends just died, I couldn't cry
 Ain't no love for us ghetto children, so we cold
 And all the drama got me stressin' like I'm hopeless, I can't cope
 Me and the homies smokin' roaches, cause we broke
 Late night hangin' out 'til the sunrise gettin' high
 Watchin' the cops roll by
 (2Pac 1995, "It Ain't Easy")

That death and dying is an everyday occurrence in the ghetto is summed up by the chorus of B.G.'s (1999) song "So Much Death": "So much death up on the city streets, until we meet my soldiers rest in peace."

Preoccupation with Death and Dying

Adolescents raised in extremely disadvantaged communities often speak about their slim chances of seeing adulthood (Majors and Billson 1992), and it's no surprise that rappers are equally preoccupied with death and dying. In "If I Ruled the World," Nas (1996) begins the song by asking,

Life
 I wonder
 will it take me under
 I don't know?

Some rappers recognize that their criminal lifestyles will likely contribute to an early death:

Life's a bitch, who do you trust
 I put my fate in my glock [gun], cause I know it's gonna bust
 I used to think the hood was cool
 But my ghetto ties keep me checking in my rearview
 (C-Murder 1998, "Ghetto Ties")

Fuck dreamin' the same dreams, bein' down for the same team
 When it seems to be, reality is just a dream
 Eye to eye, the colors that I wear is do or die
 When I walk down the street, will I meet evil in disguise?
 So, I tote a fo' fo' [44-caliber gun] with hollow tips
 While my mind tellin' me "should I not" or "should I peel it?"
 (The Dogg Pound 1995, "Reality")

Others believe that simply residing in the ghetto is life threatening:

What's the purpose? I just go my way
 Know my way, 'till bullets blow my way
 Which they might, 'cause any night can change your life
 Keep your state of mind tight and remain alright
 (The Lox 1998, "I Wanna Thank You")

In some cases, preoccupation with death turns into paranoia and insecurity, as it does with 2Pac who continuously wonders whether each day will be his last. In

the song appropriately titled "Only Fear of Death" (2Pac 1997), the listener can sense 2Pac's paranoia:

Show me a miracle, I'm hopeless, I'm chokin' off
 Marijuana smoke, with every toke it's like I'm losin' focus
 Fallin' to sleep while I'm at service, when will I die?
 Forever paranoid and nervous because I'm high
 Don't mention funerals I'm stressin', and goin' nutty
 And reminiscin' 'bout them niggas that murdered my buddy
 Everybody's dyin' am I next, who can I trust?
 Will they be G's [gangstas], and look at me before they bust?
 Or will they kill me while I'm sleepin', two to the head
 While I'm in bed, leakin' blood on my satin sheets

Likewise in C-Murder's (1998) "Constantly in Danger," the rapper exclaims,

Bullet wounds at my back keep me paranoid
 I'm hearing gunshots, ducking behind cars
 Will I end up in the grave or the penitentiary?
 Oh God, don't let the reaper capture me

Strongly religious rappers may speak to God and ask for protection, as in this last example, but they also turn to God for understanding and explanation (Anderson 1999:137). Rappers' preoccupation with death even extends to consideration of the afterlife. Songs like "Is There Heaven for a Gangsta?" (Tru 1997) and "I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto" (2Pac 1997) reveal concern both about dying and life after death.

Some rappers eventually come to accept death and even welcome the reprieve from living in the ghetto (Boyd 1997:135-37). In "Ready to Die," Notorious B.I.G. announces his desire to take his own life, whereas 2Pac characterizes life in the ghetto as futile:

My shit is deep, deeper than my grave G
 I'm ready to die, and nobody can save me
 Fuck the world, fuck my moms and my girl
 My life is played out like a jheri curl, I'm ready to die
 (Notorious B.I.G. 1994, "Ready to Die")

Bye bye, I was never meant to live
 Can't be positive, when the ghetto's where you live
 Bye bye, I was never meant to be
 Livin' like a thief, runnin' through the streets
 Bye bye, and I got no place to go
 Where they find me? 16 on death row
 (2Pac 1997, "16 on Death Row" [chorus])

Other rappers feel that death and dying are simply part of the equation given a life of crime and violence. Consider DMX's reflection of his life and possible death: "Death is in the air, and I don't know if it's mine, but I know if it's time, it'll be what it is." Or consider the Dogg Pound's frank statement: "Cause those who live wrong is bound to live a short life"; and Scarface's realization that death is

imminent: "Walkin' on my tippy-toe cause the life I live ain't long and I know." As Anderson (1999:136) suggests, the notion is that life will be short given the way the rapper is living it, and therefore death is just a consequence of living by the street code. In "Life We Chose," Nas (1999) presents dying young as a *fait accompli*:

It's the life we chose, where friends become foes
 And the dough'll get you killed quicker than you know
 This is the life we chose, bring fake snakes and hoes
 And the only way out, is death or goin' broke
 This is the life we chose, ain't too many happy endings
 That's why there ain't too many happy niggas in it
 And I'll admit it, this life is fucked up but yo . . .
 This life is the only life I know

With such an outlook, living fast and large in the present makes sense, for tomorrow isn't promised. DMX (1999) adopts this sentiment in "One More Road to Cross," where he sings in the chorus,

One more road to cross
 One more risk to take
 Gotta live my life
 Like there's one more move to make

And although in "Only Fear of Death" 2Pac is paranoid and afraid of dying (as quoted above, p. 449), in "Outlaw" he projects an image of toughness by proclaiming he fears no one and nothing, least of all death:

I witnessed niggas lose they chest
 For ordinary reasons niggas bodies put to rest
 So I just . . . swallow my Beck's and holla, "Fuck em!"
 And if I'm next . . . just let a nigga step with somethin'
 I ain't fearin' nuttin'
 (2Pac 1995, "Outlaw")

As Anderson explains, "There is a strong belief in fate and the notion that a person has a time to be on the planet, but that people can 'rush' their time by 'living fast' or 'running in the fast lane'" (1999:137-38). In the end, many rappers simply acknowledge that they see "death around the corner" (2Pac 1995) and, in some cases, even encourage friends and family not to mourn but to celebrate their passing, as Jay-Z (1998) requests in the chorus of "If I Should Die":

If I should die don't cry my niggas
 Just ride my niggas, bust bullets in the sky my niggas
 And when I'm gone don't mourn my niggas
 Get on my niggas when it's real
 Say word to Shawn [Jay-Z's given name] my niggas
 If I should die

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research has been twofold: first, to describe the larger social-structural context for understanding the emergence of gangsta rap as a principal form

of rap music, and second, to determine the extent to which gangsta rap reflects elements of the street code—nihilism in particular. Regarding the first aim, I discussed how social-structural changes including major shifts in the urban economy and, especially, a renewed “get tough on crime approach” have had dire consequences for black inner-city communities. I also described how these changes, both societal and communal, have resulted in a street culture or code that governs social relations among residents. The street code often serves as the “classroom” for learning about, among other things, respect, violence, death, and dying.

The second aim—to document and characterize the street code in rap music—was addressed through mixed method analyses of rap music lyrics from 1992 to 2000. Whereas the quantitative analysis verified that nihilism and other street code dimensions were present (and in some cases pervasive) in rap music, the qualitative assessment explored how identity, culture, nihilism, and related topics were portrayed in the songs themselves. Nihilism, and issues related to death and dying, not only comprises an important part of the street code but emerges as a significant theme in rap music. One in four songs referenced nihilism, but more importantly, the main focus of nearly all of these songs was on one of the sub-themes identified: bleak surroundings with little hope, pervasive violence in the ghetto, and preoccupation with death and dying. Collectively, the results from the study provide a better understanding of what challenges inner-city residents face, how they interpret and experience their lives, and how they respond to the conditions in their communities.

Two points must be stressed with respect to this research. First, structure cannot be removed from the equation; in fact, it is the key determinant. To understand the widespread social dislocation in inner-city poor communities, one must approach these problems—along with other urban ills—from a structural as well as cultural standpoint.

Inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, limited basic public services (police response in emergencies, building maintenance, trash pickup, lighting and other services that middle-class neighborhoods take for granted), the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and absence of hope for the future.” (Anderson 1999:32).

Second, the hopeless, stressful, and often violent life experiences described by rappers, although striking, are not experienced by all, or even most, residents. Again Anderson (1999) reminds us that “residents are decent or trying to be” (p. 36), and “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). Just as rap is a diverse musical tradition, the experiences of young black men in the inner city are not universal to all black people or even all black inner-city residents. In essence, gangsta rap’s images of black culture are not necessarily accurate representations simply because the transmitter is black (Kitwana 1994:13).

This point relates to another issue—the reality and/or reproduction of the street code in rappers’ lyrics and its correspondence with the “lived experience”

of listeners of rap music, many of whom are white middle-class youth. Concerning the veracity of the violent street life depicted in rap music, I argue that of lesser importance is whether or not this is an “actual” or “literal” reality. What is more important is that rap music creates a cultural understanding of urban street life that is violent, misogynistic, and at times hopeless that blacks (and some whites) alike confront on a daily basis. Perhaps this image provokes racism. Perhaps it helps subvert existing structures of inequality. Perhaps it reifies those structures. But what this vision of urban life definitely does do is to affect how we might view and interpret urban settings and their residents. Rappers say they are just “keeping it real” in portraying street life as it is, and people have been “telling it like it is” for years. This doesn’t mean that rappers literally convey the importance of respect, violence, and so on; rather, they create the sense that these things are key elements in urban street life, for better or worse. These lyrics may stem from a need to share what they perceive as real, or it may be for commercial reasons. I argue that this distinction is less important and interesting compared to how rappers create the aura of the violent streets where issues of death and dying are paramount.

This research raises an important issue that merits discussion—the characterization of rap music, and its messages, in the context of the larger culture. To many, the street code and related messages within rap music reflect an oppositional culture, “an ardent form of resistance” (Martinez 1997:268) that serves to “disturb the peace” (Smitherman 1997:4). In prior literature, the emphasis has been on rap as a resistant, oppositional, countercultural form of expressive culture (Negus 1999:489). But 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 thinking that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values created and sustained in the larger society. As such, gangsta rap is just one manifestation of the culture of violence that saturates American society as a whole. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the values that underpin some rap music are very much by-products of the larger American culture.

Finally, the findings suggest a number of important directions for future research. An essential follow-up to this study would take researchers into inner-city communities to talk with residents, particularly those who listen to rap music. Face-to-face interviews are necessary to understand how residents respond to, interpret, and are influenced by rap music’s content. Do the feelings and experiences described by rappers resonate with the feelings and experiences of residents? How might they diverge?

Whereas many rappers in the study sample were raised in extremely disadvantaged communities and shared fairly similar experiences, today more and more rappers come from diverse backgrounds, including middle-class communities. And female rappers are more common than ever. Also of interest, therefore, is how the changing composition of rappers will influence the lyrical content. Given varied racial, socioeconomic, and gendered backgrounds, can we expect future rap music to focus less on street code themes such as nihilism and violence? In essence, how, if at all, will the content of rap music change in the next decade, and

to what extent will these changes correlate with both the diversification of rappers and the shifting contexts of urban communities?

Finally, although this study has not been concerned with the role of the record industry in the production of rap, future work should incorporate an analysis of the industry's ever-increasing role. Critics note that the violence and gangsterism in today's rap music has been exaggerated as a marketing ploy by record companies. Contrasting earlier rap with that of today, Smith (1997:346) contends: "Public Enemy made the ghetto visible in order to abolish it. Many of today's rappers make the ghetto visible in order to sell and be sold." Furthermore, the current message is that gangsta rap is in, and that to be a successful rapper one must be aligned with the corporate industry's agenda. As such, artists in search of securing record deals report that they are often told that their message is not hard enough, that they are too clean-cut, that "hardcore" is what is selling, or that the world has enough prophets (Krimms 2000:71). Clearly, a directly proportional relationship is developing between gangsta rap's explicitness and the sale of its records. Future research should assess the consequences of such a relationship (see Forman 2002).

The *St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture* defines gangsta rap this way: "Gangsta rap is the most controversial style of the rap music genre. It has achieved global prominence through its vivid sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic lyrics, as well as its violent depiction of urban ghetto life in America." And Robin Kelley has this to say: "The misogyny is so dense that it sounds more like little kids discovering nasty words for the first time. . . . It is pure profanity bereft of the rich storytelling and use of metaphor and simile that have been cornerstones of rap music since its origins" (1996:147). Though there is some truth to these depictions, my in-depth analysis of rap music throughout the 1990s suggests that they do not tell the full story. What is missing in these quotes—but is clear from the study—is an understanding of the challenges inner-city residents face, how they interpret and experience their lives, and how they respond to conditions in their communities.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks Ami Lynch for research assistance and Ronald Weitzer and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

NOTES

1. The quotation in the title, "I see death around the corner," is from the title of a song by 2Pac (1995).
2. There is some debate in the literature regarding the precise time period in which gangsta rap emerged. Some scholars cite the mid-to-late 1980s as the key time period (Perkins 1996:18; Rose 1994:59). Others suggest it was the early 1990s (Boyd 1997:39; Kelley 1996:147; Keyes 2002:104; Kitwana 2002:xiv; Krimms 2000:83; Smith 1997:346; Watkins 2001:389).
3. For a rebuttal of this argument, see Henderson (1996:n10).
4. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, in 1996—the mid-year of the study period—13 percent of black sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds were dropouts compared to only 7.3 percent of young whites.

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