‘I Gave You Power’:
Guns, Gun Violence and Rap Music

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

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

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

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

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

• “Popular forms of music contain significant cultural traditions that cannot be severed from the socio-historical moment in which they take place” (Rose 1994:xiv)

• “The hyper-segregated conditions of the postindustrial ghetto became a fertile reservoir of cultural production” (Watkins 2001:389)

• Rap music “anticipated the racial mood shifts and growing discontent of a generation of young black Americans who were either disillusioned by the racial hostilities brought on by participation in the societal mainstream or dislocated from the center of social and economic life altogether” (Watkins 2001:381)
Themes in the Lyrics

- Changing societal and neighborhood conditions
- Increasingly violent nature of ghetto
- Guns as necessary for survival
- Attitudes such as bleak outlook on life, sense of powerlessness, frustration and despair
- Fear of death and dying
- Resignation or acceptance of death
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 slin’ crack rock or you got a wicked jumpshot
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 getting’ crazier and major
Kids younger than me, they got the sky grand pagers
Goin’ outta town, blowin’ up
Six months later all the dead bodies showin’ up
It make me wanna grab the nine and the shottie
But I gotta go identify the body
Damn, what happened to the summertime cookouts?
Every time I turn around a nigga getting’ took out
Shit, my momma got cancer in her breast
Don't ask me why I'm motherfuckin’ stressed, things done changed
(Things Done Changed, Notorious B.I.G.)
I grew up in the 70’s, somethin’ like Crooklyn
But I was in Cali not Brooklyn
I could tell the whole world was going crazy
But it really didn't happen ‘til the 80’s
With free basin and smokin’ crack
A lotta people learned not to joke with that
Streets flooded, with homeless folks
Whole families, lives gone up in smoke
We’re all related to a crackhead
Sometimes I wake up in the mornin’ and want to go back to bed
Layin’ there thinkin’ bout things
About the way life change
(Thangs Change, Too Short)
Vision the canvas, I paint a picture
Similar to Ernie Barnes [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 and fell to his death, it’s real
Handball walls displayed with R.I.P murals
(Streets Raised Me, Mobb Deep)
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] sales
Cause life is hell and everybody dies
(Heavy in the Game, 2Pac)
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]
(Ghetto Bluez, Mo Thugs)
In gats we trust, No Limit [name of record label] niggas goin’ bust
If you ride with me, you gots to die with me
(Only the Strong Survive, C-Murder)

Life a bitch, who do you trust
I put my fate in my glock, cause I know it’s gonna bust
(Ghetto Ties, C-Murder)

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
(Bang Bang, Dr. Dre)
Woke up this morning with the thought of robbin’ a bank to get rich
Ain’t ate in days so it ain’t no thang to click click bitch gimme your shit
And I can’t escape, some say it’s a phase
If it is, only way I’m gonna survive is if I play with my gauge
(Creepin’ on Ah Come Up, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony)

I’m from Uptown…and that ain’t no Beverly Hills
You wan’ know what that be like? Well, curiosity kills
Send chills up my trigga finger, blast the dummy
‘Specially if it’s a drought, I got to have the money
Take the hit, even if it’s below the average money
Got to make it through the week, and feed my family uppy
(Not Like Me, Lil’ Wayne f/ Big Tymers)
Caps get peeled [people get shot] on the regular
Cause niggas try to get me for my cellular
(Say Hi to the Bad Guy, Ice Cube)

Step away with your fist-fight ways
Motherfucker, this ain't back in the day
(Things Done Changed, Notorious B.I.G.)

The streets is watching you, when you froze your arms
Niggas wanna test you and your gun goes warm
Can’t get caught with your feet up, gotta keep your heat [gun] up
Sweet niggas running ‘round swearing shit is sweeter
One you’re tagged lame the game is follow the leader
Everybody want a piece of your scrilla [money], so you gotta keep it realer
Kidnap niggas wanna steal ya
Broke niggas want no cash, they just wanna kill ya
For the name, niggas don’t know the rules
Disrespecting the game, want you to blow your cool
Force your hand, of course that man’s plottin’
Smarten up, the streets is watching, it’s on
(The Streets is Watching, Jay Z)
My whole family been raised, on shit that ain’t okay
Ain’t nuttin’ on this earth will make a nigga like me stay
I’m reminiscin’, and catchin’ flashbacks when niggas ran up
In my house and I was too young, to try to blast back
What happened then? No one would tell me since I was three
Heard that God took my peoples, now they living somewhere free
But fuck that, you got what’s mines and I want that
Never drop my guard, been on the squad, since ways back
And now I’m sittin’, holdin’ in anger because my parents missin’
Thuggin’ immortal, got some war stories for ya
(Tradin’ War Stories, Napoleon)
Damn, a nigga style is unorthodox
Grip the glock, when I walk down the crowded blocks
Just in case a nigga wanna act out
I just black out, and blow they mutherfuckin’ back out
(Niggas, Notorious B.I.G.)

It’s a cold world bundle up
Keep your heat [gun] on at all times
And never freeze up
And your eyes blink you could catch a hole in your tank
Have you leaking all over the place
Watch how you speak
And watch how you move through the streets
I got a mob of niggas with heats [guns]
We live but ah squeeze ‘fore we think
Breathe ‘fore is too late
Uh you fucked up and got laid to sleep
(I’m Going Out, Mobb Deep)
Themes of Death and Dying

- “I See Death around the Corner” (2Pac)
- “So Much Death” (B.G.)
- “Till We Dead and Gone” (Master P)
- “Killin’ Fields” (Method Man)
- “Killaifornia” [instead of California] (Cypress Hill)
- “Mo Murda” (Bone Thugs-N-Harmony)
- “Murder Was the Case” (Snoop Dogg)
- “Ready to Die” (Notorious B.I.G.)
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
(Miss You, Notorious B.I.G.)

I want ya’ll to play this at funerals in the hood
‘Til all the black on black crime stop
Some say the blind lead the blind
But in the ghetto you never know
When it’s gon’ be yo time
(I Miss My Homies, Master P)
Call an ambulance, Jamie been shot, word to Kemit
Don’t go Son, nigga you my motherfuckin’ heart
Stay still Son, don’t move, just think about Keeba
She’ll be three in January, your young God needs you
The ambulance is taking too long
Everybody get the fuck back, excuse me bitch, gimmie your jack
One, seven one eight, nine one one, low battery, damn
Blood comin’ out his mouth, he bleedin’ badly
Nahhh Jamie, don’t start that shit
Keep your head up, if you escape hell we gettin’ fucked up
When we was eight, we went to Bat Day to see the Yanks
In sixty-nine, his father and minerals, they robbed banks
He pointed to the charm on his neck
With his last bit of energy left, told me rock it with respect
I opened it, seen the God holdin’ his kids
Photogenic, tears just burst out my wig
Plus he dropped one, oh shit, here come his Old Earth
With no shoes on, screamin’ holdin’ her breasts with a gown on
She fell and then lightly touched his jaw, kissed him
Rubbed his hair, turned around the ambulance was there
Plus the blue coats, Officer Lough, took it as a joke
Weeks ago he strip-searched the God and gave him back his coke
But suddenly a chill came through it was weird
Felt like my man, was cast out my heaven now we share
Finally this closed chapter, comes to an end
He was announced, pronounced dead, y’all, at twelve ten
(Impossible, Wu-Tang Clan)
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
(Murder was the Case, Snoop Dogg)
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?”
(Reality, The Dogg Pound)

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
(Continuously in Danger, C-Murder)
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
(Only Fear of Death, 2Pac)
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
(I Wanna Thank You, The Lox)

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
(Life We Chose, Nas)
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
(Ready to Die, Notorious B.I.G.)

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
(16 on Death Row, 2Pac)
Wonderin’ why the real niggas always the ones to die
So I just smoke my weed and try to clear my mind
(I Miss My Homies, Master P)

I smoke a blunt to take the pain out
And if I wasn’t high, I’d probably try to blow my brains out
I’m hopeless, they shoulda killed me as a baby
And now they got me trapped in the storm, I’m going crazy
(Lord Knows, 2Pac)

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
(Ghetto Ties, C-Murder)
I don't give a fuck
They done pushed me to my limit, I’m all in
I might blow up any minute, did it again
And now I'm in the back of the paddy wagon
While this cop's bragging about the nigga he's jackin’
I see no justice, all I see is niggas dying fast
The sound of a gun blast, then watch the hearse pass
Just another day in the life, G
Gotta step lightly, cause cops tried to snipe me
The cabs, they don’t wanna stop for a brother, man
But damn near have an accident to pick up another man
(I Don’t Give a Fuck, 2Pac)

I’m America’s nightmare
Young, black and just don’t give a fuck
I just wanna get high and live it up
So fuck a 9-to-5! And whitey tryin’ to slave us
With minimum wages, slammin’ my niggas up in cages
(Last Days, Onyx)
I Gave You Power
Nas

• “I was around a lot of guns then. Guns were in my sleep, in my car, in my home, guns were on my person, guns were on my friends. That’s how much they were around. There was so much around me that I rapped about it. It’s crazy to think about that today, but it was my reality. It was in my head 24/7.”
https://youtu.be/PXAtUR80IOQ
Intro:
Damn! Look how muh-fuckers use a nigga
Just use me for whatever the fuck they want
I don't get to say shit
Just grab me, just do what the fuck they want
Sell me, throw me away
Niggaz just don't give a fuck about a nigga like me right?
Like I'm a f... I'm a gun, shit
It's like I'm a motherfuckin gun
I can't believe this shit...
Word up...
Verse 1:
I seen some cold nights and bloody days
They grab and me bullets spray
They use me wrong so I sing this song 'til this day
My body is cold steel for real
I was made to kill, that's why they keep me concealed
Under car seats they sneak me in clubs
Been in the hands of mad thugs
They feed me when they load me with mad slugs
Seventeen precisely, one in my head
They call me Desert Eagle, semi-auto with lead
I'm seven inches four pounds, been through so many towns
Ohio to Little Rock to Canarsie, livin harshly
Beat up and battered, they pull me out
I watch as niggaz scattered, makin me kill
But what I feel it never mattered
When I'm empty I'm quiet, findin myself fiendin to be fired
A broken safety, niggaz place me in shelves
Under beds, so I beg for my next owner to be a thoroughbred
Keep me full up with hollow heads

Chorus:
How you like me now? I go blaow
It's that shit that moves crowds makin every ghetto foul
I might have took your first child
Scarred your life, crippled your style
I gave you power
I made you buck wild
Verse 2:
Always I'm in some shit, my abdomen is the clip
The barrel is my dick, uncircumcised
Pull my skin back and cock me, I bust off when they unlock me
Results of what happens to niggaz shock me
I see niggaz bleedin runnin from me in fear, stunningly tears
Fall down the eyes of these so-called tough guys, for years
I've been used in robberies, givin niggaz heart to follow me
Placin peoples in graves, funerals made cause I was sprayed
I was laid in a shelf, with a grenade
Met a wrecked-up tech with numbers on his chest that say
Five-two-oh-nine-three-eight-five and zero
Had a serial defaced, hopin one day, police would place
Where he came from, a name or some sort of person to claim him
Tired of murderin, made him wanna be a plain gun
But yo I had some other plans, like the next time the beef is on
I make myself jam right in my owner's hand

How you like me now? I go blaow
It's that shit that moves crowds makin every ghetto foul
I might have took your first child
Scarred your life, crippled your style
I gave you power
I made you buck wild
Verse 3:
Yo, weeks went by and I'm surprised
Still stuck in the shelf with all the things that an outlaw hides
Besides me it's bullets, two vests and then a nine
There's a grenade in a box, and that tech that kept cryin
Cause he ain't been cleaned in a year, he's rusty as clear
He's bout to fall to pieces, cause of his murder career
Yo, I can hear somebody comin in, open the shelf
His eyes bubblin, he said, "It was on"
I felt his palm troubled him shakin
Somebody stomped him out, his dome was achin
He placed me on his waist, the moment I've been waitin
My creation was for blacks to kill blacks
It's gats like me that accidentally, go off, makin niggaz memories
But this time, it's done intentionally
He walked me outside, saw this cat
Cocked me back, said, "Remember me?"
He pulled the trigger but I held on, it felt wrong
Knowing niggaz is waiting in hell for 'im
He squeezed harder, I didn't budge, sick of the blood
Sick of the thugs, sick of wrath of the, next man's grudge
What the other kid did was pull out, no doubt
A newer me in better shape, before he lit out, he lead the chase
My owner fell to the floor, his wig split so fast
I didn't know he was hit, it's over with
Heard mad niggaz screamin, niggaz runnin, cops is comin
Now I'm happy, until I felt somebody else grab me
Damn!