Tragic Narratives in Popular Culture: Depictions of Homicide in Rap Music

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Abstract:

Homicide is a rare event, but depictions of it are quite common in our culture and discourse. Commercially successful rappers have appropriated homicide as a central theme in their lyrical compositions. The tremendous success of rap music is indicative of its increasing popular appeal and cultural impact. We reveal the ways homicide is constructed within rap music and its frequency of occurrence across time. Employing a cultural criminology framework, we analyze the most popular rap songs over the period 1989–2000, as determined by Billboard music charts, for references to homicide. Using content analysis we explore the emergent themes associated with homicide scenarios in rap lyrics. Results show violent death was constructed in glorified ways, incorporated cautionary tales, or used as an analogy for powerful rhyming. The major themes found in these homicide-related rap lyrics were the normalization of killing, respect maintenance, confrontation with the power structure, vengeance, and masculine confrontation. Gender patterns of killing were surprising and distinct. Homicide was almost always male on male. Careful consideration is given to the multiple meanings of homicide, particularly the ways rappers have appropriated the word “killing” and transformed it into a term that indicates creative success.

Keywords: cultural criminology | homicide | narrative | popular culture| rap music | violence

Article:

Thou Shalt Always Kill Song by rapper Dan le Sac (2007), referring to excellence in lyrical performance

Rap music has enjoyed tremendous popularity in the last two decades, becoming one of the most dominant forms of popular culture (Foreman, 2002; Garofalo, 1997; Kopano, 2002; Kubrin,

2005).[3] Due to its alleged violent, graphic, and misogynistic lyrics, rap music, and "gangsta rap" in particular, has elicited an adverse reaction among moral entrepreneurs and legislators (Richardson and Scott, 2002), and at the same time has been tremendously popular among both white and black youth audiences (Rose, 1994). Fictionalized representations of homicide are a staple in U.S. media entertainment, and rap music has appropriated homicide as a central theme in lyrical compositions. We add to a growing body of scholarship on rap music by investigating the frequency and construction of homicide in the most popular rap songs, based on Billboard's top radio and record sales, over the period 1989 to 2000. Using content analysis, we extract and discuss emerging themes associated with homicide scenarios in rap music.

The publication of Baker's 1993 book, *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy,* encouraged scholars to give rap music more attention and serious study. Since then, the study of rap has taken off, with studies ranging from experiments used to observe the impact that rap music has on attitudes and behavior, to content analysis of rap lyrics, to deconstruction and critical commentary, to ethnographic studies charting the significance of rap music in different youth cultures (Bennet, 1999; Binder, 1993; Fried, 1999; Herd, 2005; Kubrin, 2005, 2006; Martinez, 1997; Powell, 1991; Quinn, 1996; Rose, 1991; Smitherman, 1997; Wester *et al*., 1997). But the very study of rap presents a dilemma. Since we are talking about homicide, which is arguably a troubling feature of rap music, we run the risk of further stigmatizing young rap artists as "dangerous others" (Mahiri and Conner, 2003). We also risk reinforcing the denigration of this culture. For this reason we include a section on the extent to which rap music really reflects real-life conditions and we discuss the extent to which it might really affect listener behavior. We restrict our analysis to a "rhetoric of homicide" in rap music (Armstrong, 1993), and by employing a cultural criminology analytical framework, engage in a cultural analysis of musical meaning.

An additional problem with researching homicide in rap music is conveying the impression that rap music is the sole "purveyor of violence." Yet there is hardly an artistic genre that has not laid claim to depictions of homicide. Homicide is perhaps more visible in rap music, due to its graphic content, but it is still present in nearly every musical genre (Armstrong, 1993; Richardson and Scott, 2002;Thomas, 2005), as well as in religion, art, film, and literature. An inventory of homicide on TV would very likely parallel depictions of homicide in rap music in number. But rap music possesses a certain "shock value" that other mediums do not achieve. In fact, some rap artists have admitted to deliberately crafting shocking lyrics (Quinn, 1996). Rap music is also a segmented market and subculture. Quite often, the media frames music in such a way that rap music is constructed as more "harmful" than other types of music (Binder, 1993).

Before the presentation of our research, we broadly discuss the implications of homicide (and violence more generally) in rap music and articulate our analytical framework, cultural criminology. We reject applying a simple good/bad dichotomy to homicide-oriented rap lyrics. In fact, one of the problems with public discourse surrounding rap music is that the issue is approached in dangerously simple terms (i.e., rap music is bad because it glorifies violence). Rap

music has been made into a scapegoat for all types of social problems, including the creation of juvenile delinquency (Lynxwiler and Gay, 2000). Indeed, former Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton and presidential candidate Bob Dole blamed "gangsta rap" music for contributing to the problem of youth violence (Garofalo, 1997). We do not intend to fuel this moral panic. Instead, our goal is to reveal the complexity of homicide-related rap lyrics by exploring their style and hidden meanings. Instead of reifying stereotypes about rap music, this research has the potential to dismantle myths about rap music by exposing its hidden meaning.

Rap Music and the Social

The idea that violent music precipitates violence in society is pervasive (see Binder, 1993; Dreisinger, 2005). Most scholars agree that music (and media more generally) affects our behavior in some capacity. However, there is disagreement over the extent to which media influences our behavior and attitudes. One only needs to observe a group of teenagers to see that kids emulate rap artists through the clothing, hairstyles, and accessories they wear.

Rap music also provides a cultural vocabulary, where young people parrot words from popular rap songs (Bennet, 1999). Although rap music may be appealing to young people, for adults, it is more likely that rap music affects negative attitudes toward African Americans and perhaps fuels the public's fear of crime and contributes to "generational warfare" (Dyson, 2001). The well-documented fear of crime is, in fact, fear of men, and perhaps fear of African-American men (Glassner, 1999; Johnson and Trawalter, 2000). There is little doubt that rap serves as a key contributing factor in the social construction of African-American culture.

Does viewing violence in the media cause violence in individual behavior? Psychologists have produced a convincing body of evidence that viewing violent television increases both aggression and violence in some children (Anderson *et al*., 2003).[4] Not all viewers are affected by media violence in the same way, however. In fact, quite of bit of evidence suggest that individuals are selective in the manners in which they internalize, understand, or even act when receiving violent messages (Baron and Reiss, 1985; Collins *et al*., 1984; Felson, 1996; Freedman, 1984; Fried, 1999; Hinckley, 2005; Josephson, 1987). Demographic and situational factors are also important confounding influences, such as parental control (Huesmann and Eron, 1986). Researchers are confident that viewing television violence increases risk for subsequent aggressive behavior; the evidence linking violent music lyrics to violent behavior, however, is mixed and inconclusive (Anderson *et al*., 2003).

Are there any positive social effects of rap music? Researchers have documented some potential ameliorative effects of rap music. First, it is possible that violent music creates an "uncomfortableness" that raises curiosity and consciousness, perhaps even mobilizing people toward social action (Dyson, 2001; Quinn, 1996). Second, rap music may serve as a counter discourse, or a type of resistance (Rose, 1994). Rap music may provide an opportunity for economically and politically powerless people to identify with lyrics as an expression of

resistance, or an expression of "black rage" (Martinez, 1997; Powell, 1991; Quinn, 1996). Finally, rap music potentially allows subordinate groups to define their own set of core values and identities apart from the mainstream (Martinez, 1997).

Rap Music as Autobiography or Fiction?

Rap music originated on turntables in the early 1970s in clubs and studios of inner-city New York neighborhoods (Killion, 2005). Rap music has changed over time, altering its form around the early 1980s. Early rap/hip-hop artists, such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, crafted lyrics about inner-city life. Early rappers were regarded as storytellers, disturbers of the peace, and cultural historians who were "testifying" to the lived experiences of urban blacks during a period of political backlash, urban neglect, and stigmatization as a criminal underclass (Powell, 1991; Smitherman, 1997). Since these early rappers were exposing the conditions of inner-city life, one may reasonably predict that early rap lyrics might entail depictions of violence, given the high rates of homicide at the time (Powell, 1991;http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/hmrt.htm).[5]

There is not a complete agreement among scholars as to whether rap is *still* an expression of real-life conditions. One perspective maintains that rap continues to serve as a conduit to voice concerns about the deprivation in the African-American community and to protest existing conditions (Kopano, 2002; Stephens and Wright, 2001). Rap artists are often viewed as ambassadors of inner-city African-American life, especially the gangster life. Kopano (2002) calls rap music a "rhetoric of resistance," primarily to issues of race; a rhetoric belonging mostly to young, African-American males.

Another perspective holds that as rap has become increasingly commercialized, it has been co-opted by capitalist interests (Foreman, 2002). Profit industries have turned these cultural symbols into commodities and in the process removed lyrical expressions from their origins of symbolic meaning (Merrin, 2005). This sentiment has even been echoed in rap lyrics. As The Roots (1997) sang: "The principles of true hip-hop have been forsaken/It's all contractual and about money makin'/Pretend-to-be cats don't seem to know they limitations/Exact replication and false representation" ("What They Do"). In this passage The Roots lament the commercial "sell out" of hip-hop, resulting in a "falseness" surrounding industry-influenced music.

There are no doubt social structural conditions and social relations from which hip-hop/rap culture emerged, but it is likely that contemporary rap music has become somewhat dislodged from lived experience. It is conceivable that rap lyrics were initially a reflection of "true" social conditions, but with the increasing commercialization of rap, this music has taken on a life of its own.[6] Some of the depictions in lyrics may be a product of imaginations in the music industry, not of rap artists per se (Lynch and Krzychi, 1998). Given that rap music has become so lucrative, it is reasonable to assume that more recent rap compositions involving violence are probably contrived in order to generate profit. In this sense, then, contemporary homicide

narratives in rap music are “hyperreal,” where the distance between the “real” and the representation is unknown, and the song narratives are disconnected from any true event (Merrin, 2005). As N.W.A. (1989) rapped: “Yeah, they want reality, but you will hear none/they’d rather exaggerate a little fiction” (“Straight Outta Compton”).

It is unlikely that researchers could completely disentangle the social and the commercial origins of rap music. Cultural images in the media reflect, produce, reproduce, shape, and change social reality. Such representations are a “hall of mirrors” (Ferrell, 1999), and are profoundly shaped by capitalism. As such, we follow cultural criminologists in accepting that:

this [cultural criminology] investigation suggests blurring the analytic boundary between producer and audience—recognizing, in other words, that a variety of groups both produce and consume contested images of crime—and moving ahead to explore the many microcircuits of meaning that collectively construct the reality of crime. (Ferrell, 1999:409)

Analytic Framework and Research Methods

It is tempting to link rap music to “real” conditions, but testing such a relationship would be problematic. Instead, we are interested in revealing the ways homicide is constructed within rap music and its frequency of occurrence across time. We are interested in exploring whether there has been an increase in homicide-related rap lyrics across the period 1989–2000, given that homicide rates began to fall in 1991 and continued a stable downward trend for over a decade. Aside from a simple accounting of frequency, our main interest lies in unearthing the context and meaning in which references to homicide in rap lyrics are playing out.

The analytic framework employed in this study is cultural criminology. Developed by Ferrell and Sanders (1995), cultural criminology is a framework that is attentive to symbolic representations, image, and style among deviant and criminal communities. Such a perspective seeks to uncover “subjective meaning” of crime and deviance. One of the tasks that cultural criminologists have undertaken is examining “mediated crime imagery” (Ferrell, 1999:396). Cultural criminologists have examined the cultural constructions of crime and justice in music, comic books, and news media (Peelo, 2006; Phillips and Strobl, 2006; Tunnel, 1995). Our interest is in uncovering the particular form that homicide is taking in these lyrics.

We chose to focus on homicide in rap music exclusively for several reasons. Homicide is a rare event, but depictions of it are quite common in our culture and discourse. One of the more curious features of the U.S. entertainment industry is the extent to which homicide has been appropriated, fictionalized, and dramatized for massive consumption. Homicide is perhaps most visible in rap music, particularly gangsta rap, due to rap music’s popularity, the notorious and sometimes tragic reputations of rap artists, such as Tupac Shakur, and the moral crusades led against it. Cultural criminologists are ever mindful of power, conflict, and authority over contested cultural symbols. In the case of gangsta rap music, the violence depicted in these songs produced an escalating tug-of-war between a concerned public, moral crusaders, profit seekers,

media, consumers, and rap artists. The contested meaning of rap music begs for a careful investigation of the construction of killing in rap songs. We selected the term “homicide” instead of “killing,” since within rap vernacular the latter term has come to mean superior lyrical and rhyming skills. We were interested in exploring *all* the ways that references to violent death were employed.

Our key objective in selecting homicide-related rap lyrics was to capture the most popular rap songs in our sample. The rap subgenre “gangsta rap” is known to contain particularly violent lyrics. When determining our selection criteria for our sample of rap songs, we chose not to separate “gangsta rap” from other forms of rap music for a few reasons. First, scholars are not in complete agreement on what constitutes “gangsta rap,” making the selection process too arbitrary. Our literature review turned up wild variations in how scholars describe “gangsta rap.” Most scholars note that violent and misogynistic content are characteristics of “gangsta rap.” These indicators alone are not satisfactory, however. Many songs, across multiple music genres, also include violence and misogyny. The distinction between “gangsta rap” and “rap” is not clear cut. Indeed, researchers, commentators, and critics often use the words “rap” and “gangsta rap” interchangeably. Also, a substantial portion of rap music literature seems to assume that the reader knows what “rap” and “gangsta rap” are, as precise definitions are often not given. Finally, Kurbrin (2006) points out that rap music tends to mix genres so that the boundaries between rap, hip-hop, and R&B are not always distinct. For these reasons, we use a categorical system determined by one entity in the music industry, Billboard.

We depart from previous research on rap music that sought a representative sample of rap music (Herd, 2005; Kubrin, 2005, 2006). Instead, our sampling strategy was purposive in that it involved isolating the songs that were at the top of the Billboard charts. We reasoned that the top-rated songs were heard by a larger audience and therefore had a greater presence in our cultural memory. We secured our list of the most popular rap songs from Billboard. This strategy isolates hit singles, not hit albums. This is potentially problematic since songs from hit albums that never became “hit singles” may still have been consumed by a wide audience.

Our sample timeframe begins in 1989 because it was the year in which Billboard recognized rap music as its own category of music. Before 1989, Billboard lumped rap music into other musical genres, such as dance/disco and soul. The year 1989 also marked the first year for rap music’s year in review, also known as the “year in music.” We stretched the sample out over a long time period in order to minimize biasing the results. Following the work of other researchers who have conducted content analysis on rap lyrics, we stopped collecting data after the year 2000 (Kubrin, 2005, 2006).

Billboard ranks the popularity of songs from record sales and radio play. One limitation of this “sales” measure is that the borrowing or copying of tapes and compact discs, as well as illegal music downloading, may have affected record sales, which would limit some songs from being defined as “most popular.” Further, songs with violent content may not be “radio-friendly”

enough, biasing our results in favor of nonviolent songs.[7] Despite this limitation, we regarded Billboard as the most reliable data source, particularly for its consistency over time. By using Billboard we acknowledge that our research is really a study of *commercial* rap music. Rap music is inextricably bound up with the interests of the music industry. This unknown degree of influence by the music industry means that researchers cannot claim that Billboard's selections are representative of all rap music, nor can we claim that they represent authentic rap music. That said, the best-selling songs may have the most pervasive cultural presence by the sheer frequency with which they are heard.

To construct the sample, we first obtained Billboard's list of "top rap singles" and "hot rap singles"[8] for each year. Each year in music provided a range of from 30 to 50 most popular rap singles. We selected songs in order of ranking, pulling the first top 30 songs for each year. Our initial sample selection of 30 songs for 12 years yielded a list of 360 songs. We then set out to obtain lyrics for all 360 titles. We had three options for securing lyrics: (1) copy written lyrics from library books that published lyrics, (2) listen to each song and transcribe the lyrics by ear, or (3) search for song lyrics on websites. Option number 1 turned out to be impossible since the more recent songs in our sample had not been published in readily available texts, indicating that popular music moves much faster than the academic machine. The second option was also problematic, for two reasons. First, aside from the songs that we were able to borrow or listen to for free, purchasing hundreds of rap songs was outside our budget. Second, when we did begin to transcribe some songs by ear, we found many sections of verse undecipherable, thereby increasing our chances of error. The third option of securing songs from various websites proved to be the most viable option. We drew our lyrics from several rap lyric archive websites.[9] The key concern that we had with these sources was that lyrics for many of these websites are entered by fans. Given that some of these fan-based lyrics might contain errors, we conducted validity checks by cross-checking lyrics from a variety of websites for a subset of songs from our sample. We also cross-checked a smaller subset of lyrics with books and by listening to the songs.

Thirty-one songs were eliminated from our initial selection list of 360 songs. In seven cases, the song was listed in Billboard's top 30 song list for two years in a row. When the song appeared in our sample twice, we eliminated one of the entries. For the other cases of missing songs, there were 24 songs for which we were unable to find lyrics, or unable to find reliable lyrics. Our final sample consisted of 329 songs.

Our first task was to identify the frequency of references to homicide. Out of the original 329 songs, 103 contained references to homicide. About one-third of the most popular rap songs from 1989 to 2000 contained at least one reference to homicide. Songs without reference to homicide then fell out of the sample. Those songs identified as containing homicide-related lyrics were then reviewed again for the key contexts in which these references to homicide were playing out.

Homicide-related content was defined as any discussion within rap songs that indicated or alluded to the threat or actual homicide(s) of an individual or group. Material that was coded

"homicide related" involved lyrics that were premised on actual homicide(s), homicidal threats, expectations of being murdered, fear of being murdered, recalling homicides in the past, premeditations or planning of homicide(s), and warnings of potential homicide(s). As with any poetic expression, there is deliberate ambiguity surrounding many phrases. Based on contextual indicators, we made conservative judgments about our codes. With more ambiguous references, the two researchers discussed their independent interpretations to reach agreement or disagreement. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that rap music is literary in its construction and expression. These songs are complex and nuanced. Although some verses are literal in their use of language, at other times meaning is symbolic, playful, employs double entendres, or even appears at time to be nonsensical. Any method of analysis has the potential to both illuminate and obscure information; content analysis is useful to identify patterns in the material, but we acknowledge that some of the nuance in meaning can be lost by "carving up" the lyrics into categories. We also recognize that we bring our own cultural interpretations to the reading of these songs. Readers from different social locations may uncover meanings from these songs that differ from ours.

Results

After initially culling the 103 homicide-related songs from the sample, we were interested in exploring whether references to homicide in rap music were changing in frequency across time. We found a modest increasing trend across this time period. In the first three-year interval, between 1989 and 1991, 29% of the 75 most popular rap songs in our data set contained homicide-related lyrics. By the last three-year interval, 1998 to 2000, 42% of the 85 most popular rap songs we collected mentioned homicide in their lyrics. Although we do not claim to be able to link homicide-related lyrics to actual homicide events, it is worthwhile to note that the actual homicide rate was on the decline throughout the 1990s (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008), at a time when homicide in the most popular rap music was increasing. We also observed that references to homicide became increasingly graphic and lurid over time. So those who allege that there is a connection between violence and rap lyrics and actual homicides would have to demonstrate this linkage. It is worthwhile noting that this same phenomenon was happening with TV news broadcasts. As actual homicides declined, coverage of homicides increased (Glassner, 1999).

The second phase of our research involved coding emergent themes surrounding homicide references in the sample. In the broadest terms, the references to homicide in our sample of rap songs fell into one of three categories: (1) glorification of killing, (2) moralizing tales about the devastation of violent death and the need for change in society, and/or (3) homicide used as a metaphor for being a superior rapper. These categories were not always mutually exclusive. Some songs fell into two of these categories. And, of course, some lyrics had more than one meaning. Within these broad contextual categories there were a number of consistent themes that ran throughout each homicide narrative. In the case of glorification and vilification of homicide, the following themes were almost always present: the "normalization" of homicide, contests that

were male on male, homicides that were outcomes of conflicts with the power structure, respect maintenance, and revenge. The analysis that follows includes passages from lyrics that are representative of each key theme uncovered in the sample.

Homicide as a Cautionary Tale

A number of homicide references constituted the crux of "warning stories," which drew moral boundaries and cautioned that death was a consequence of a criminal lifestyle. A few of these moral pleas connected materialism to violent death. ED O.G. and Da Bulldogs (1991) rap: "You wanna take my life away as if we were in combat/You can buy some new Adidas, but you can't buy my life back" ("I Got to Have it"). Other rap songs concerned with how power inequities resulted in violent death expressed this concern through a unifying message, rather than with a hostile and retaliatory one. Some of the lyrical cautionary songs evoked themes of unity across geographic lines, for example: "And we ain't tryin to kill each other cause brother we all in/And ain't no funk between the east and the west" (Youngbloods, 1999, "U-Way").

In most of these cautionary rap songs, a victim of homicide was being eulogized. In many cases, the loss of life to homicide involved descriptions full of grief. Tupac (1995) laments: "Be the first to blast, remember Kato/No longer with us he's deceased/Call on the sirens, seen him murdered in the streets/Now rest in peace/Is there heaven for a G? Remember me/So many homies in the cemetery, shed so many tears" ("So Many Tears"). Through testifying about a loved one lost to violence, rappers were imploring against it.

Other moralizing lyrics against homicide were directed against gang activity: "The mean streets took six more lives overnight/all the result of gang-bang stupidity/by the way, you gangsters should know/one of your victims was a three year old girl" (The West Coast Rap All-Stars, 1990, "We're All in the Same Gang"). Although examples such as these issued a clear indictment of gang activity, what emerged in our data as a whole was ambivalence over killing. On the one hand, certain rappers disdain violence because of the personal and community costs, but for others, killing was normal, a way to secure respect, and a symbol of power and virility. Some storytelling about homicide confronted injustices, corruption, and neglect from the state and its authorities.

Homicide in Conflict with the Power Structure

Rap music not only depicts horizontal homicide, where members of a common community kill each other, but also vertical homicide, where violent death is the outcome of clashes with the power structure. In one case, homicide was the outcome of increasing regulation, and "disciplining" in the form of curfews, while forecasting increasing social control as a "new world order": "Oh you know what else they trying to do/Make a curfew especially for me and you/the traces of the new world order/Time is getting shorter if we don't get prepared/People it's gone be a slaughter" (Goodie Mob, 1996, "Cell Therapy"). In this example by Goodie Mob, there is a prediction of genocide and the militarization of space.

A profound distrust of the police and its related institutions emerged in homicide scenarios, suggesting that culpability for violent fatalities rests, to some extent, on officials who neglect victims' needs for protection and rescue: "Hit me/Going, going, gone/Now I dialed 911 a long time ago/Don't you see how late they're reactin'/They only come and they come when they wanna/so get the morgue embalm the goner" (Public Enemy, 1990, "911 is a Joke"). Indeed, retaliation against the power structure took multiple forms.

One murder scenario voiced resentment of white privilege and racially segregated space. The killing in this example was one of revolutionary retaliation: "It's time to take a trip to the suburbs/Let em see a nigga invitation/Point blank for the Caucasian/Cock the hammer then crackle, smile" (Ice Cube, 1990, "Amerikkka's Most Wanted"). This highly racialized fury conveys the intention of confronting "White America" in their places of hiding and eliminating them, which is an echo of revolutionary black power.

In a slightly different take on revolutionary confrontation with the power structure, The West Coast Rap All-Stars (1990) exposed the social underpinnings of black homicide, locating it within a history of segregation and deprivation, implicating whites as the culpable party: "What if we could take our enemies, feed em poison/Undereducate their girls and boys and/Split em up, make em fight one another/Better yet, make em kill for a color" ("We're All in the Same Gang"). Here the message is "doing unto oppressors as they did unto you."

The cops sometimes appeared as the perpetrators of homicide: "He was only seventeen, in a madman's dream/the cops shot the kid, I still hear him scream" (Slick Rick, 1989, "Children's Story"). It was universally true throughout our sample that the police were a dangerous entity. A few songs detailed explicit warnings that police might kill and throughout our sample the police were universally distrusted: "The task force tryin' ta peel your cap/Turn around, homeboy, ya better watch your back" (Too Short, 1989, "Life is … Too Short").

Respect Maintenance, Zero Tolerance, and Vengeance

Respect maintenance dealt with situations in which saving face, achieving or preserving one's honor, was a reason for murder. Homicide continually emerged as a consequence for disrespecting, and a warning to others: "Talk Shit?/You step outside and get blooded have your whole block flooded" (Lord Tariq and Petter Gunz, 1998, "Déjà vu Uptown Baby"). Multiple songs within our sample continually reinforced the idea that respect would be assured through the threat of violence. For example, "Yo, you better give me the respect that I deserve or I'ma take it by force/blast you with a 45 colt, make you summersault" (Canibus, 1998, "Second Round K.O."). The preoccupation consistently centered on how men regard other men. It could be that the threat of homicide is used as a tool to protect male honor, constitute power relations, and establish gender hierarchies between men. Indeed, the literature confirms that respect is a vital component of some forms of masculinity (Hunter and Davis, 1992).

In these preceding examples, there is an enforcement of a particular behavior that draws on extreme methods of discipline and revenge, which are reflective of other parts of the culture. "You better watch how you talking/and where you walkin' or you and your homies might be lines in chalk" (Coolio, 1995, "Gangsta's Paradise"). We observed extreme intolerance where the slightest error results in death: "I'm not playin, understand what I'm sayin/Catch a sucker in my way, and I'm slayin" (EPMD, 1989, "So What Cha Sayin'"). We uncovered warnings articulating zero-tolerance rules: "Wrong move (bang). Ambulance. Cot" (Ice-T, 1991, "New Jack Hustler"). It is important to note that these themes of discipline and vengeance are not unique to rap music, but are amplifications of widespread cultural values and practices (Kubrin, 2006).

We observed a language of militarization and, hence, readiness to kill: "So if you step to these soldiers I think you better show some love/cause we 99 strong, and we nuttin' but thugs/and pistols bein' cocked at all times and when you run up you goin' fall down" (Master P, 2000, "Step to Dis"). Although the language differs, themes of extremism and zero tolerance can be seen in the U.S. war on terror, and as core principles in the U.S. military. Revenge also plays out widely in our larger cultural milieu, with a U.S. criminal justice system premised on an ethic of revenge.

Killing "Skill" as Lyrical Superiority

The most frequently occurring context in our data involved justifying rap skills to the audience by linking this lyrical superiority to homicide. There is an image of the duel over honor that replays again and again in this sample of lyrics, but instead of swords, the duel to the death is a creative one with escalating antagonism and domination. House of Pain (1992) demonstrate: "So if you come to battle bring a shotgun/But if you do you're a fool, cause I duel to the death/Try and step to me you'll take your last breath/I gots the skill, come get your fill/Cause when I shoot ta give, I shoot to kill" ("Jump Around"). This phenomenon of using words as weapons and competition over creative skill has been written about elsewhere (Riley, 2005; Stapleton, 1998). What is particularly interesting is how "murder" has become synonymous with winning a rhyming duel.[10] Rap artists have incorporated homicidal lyrics as part of a contest in rapping, or as a way to mark themselves as the best rapper. "Check out my rhymes, and now check my gat/Because I'm always strapped pack with a loaded rhyme/And steppin' niggaz get knocked off" (Illegal, 1993, "We Getz Busy"). In this example, violence and lyrical skill are fused, almost as if the carrying of a gun and the readiness to kill is a prerequisite for being a good rapper. Some of these "rhyme to kill" duels suggested that battling with words was an alternative to violence: "This ain't no .38/Hit'em at point blank range/Runnin' out of ammunition/I'm done with'em/You ask me how I did'em/I let the rhythm hit'em" (Eric B. and Rakim, 1990, "Let the Rhythm Hit'em").

The fusion of homicide with powerful rhyming was always framed as a contest where the loser ended up dead and the best rapper lived. Bullets, aim, and size and style of guns were all

analogous to poetic skill: “Lyrics made of lead/Enters your head/Then eruptions of a mass production/Will spread when/Music is louder/Full of gunpowder” (Eric B. and Rakim, 1990, “Let the Rhythm Hit’em”). In many songs, bodies became guns and armor: “And fool had to figure when my tongue is the trigger/Now a piece in my mouth is releasing buckshots/No escaping because perpetrators get smoothed popped” (Compton’s Most Wanted, 1991, “Growin’ up in the Hood”). Of course, words as threats and weapons are not the same things as real weapons, as many of these rappers make clear.

Normalization of Homicide

One of the reoccurring themes that we were struck by was the extent to which killing was normative, or an expected part of life. Scarface (1995) raps: “And realized killin’ men, meant comin’ up” (“I Never Seen a Man Cry (I Seen a Man Die”)). Quite often, this expression of homicide as a fact of life was connected to existence in ghetto life: “Where a young black brother’s not promised to see the next day” (The West Coast Rap All-Stars, 1990, “We’re All in the Same Gang”), drug-related circumstances, “Every dollar I get, another brother drops” (Ice-T, 1991, “New Jack Hustler”), gang-related circumstances, “I’m a loc’ed out gangsta, set-trippin banger/death ain’t nuthin but a heartbeat away” (Coolio, 1995, “Gangsta’s Paradise”), or to essentially “get paid”: “Some Gs never change, damn they killed you for some change” (Master P, 1997, “I Miss My Homies”). A few rap songs predicted one’s own violent death in dramatic and glorified ways: “When I die there’ll be bullets and gunsmoke” (Ice-T, 1991, “New Jack Hustler”).

In song after song, homicide was a taken-for-granted assumption of urban life. Murder was mentioned not as something exceptional or unusual, but as an inevitable fixture of street life, “In the ghetto you keep one eye open” (Too Short, 1991, “The Ghetto”), and conveyed the sense that the possibility of being killed was always looming: “At night I can’t sleep, I toss and turn/It’s somebody watchin the AK’/Candle sticks in the dark, vision of bodies bein’ burned/But I don’t know who it is, so I’m watchin my back/Four walls just starin at a nigga/Some might say, ‘Take a chill, B’/I’m paranoid, sleepin with my finger on the trigger/But fuck that shit/There’s a nigga trying to kill me” (Geto Boys, 1991, “Mind Playing Tricks on Me”). In this example, Geto Boys portray harsh conditions that cause disintegration and desperate individual survival.

Part of the expectation of violent death meant handling it stoically but also living in fear: “I sit and pray everyday: God, don’t let me get smoked/Oh no, a nigga ain’t scared to go, but I still got a lot to live for” (Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, 1996, “Tha Crossroad”). Paranoia of being killed was mentioned several times: “My adversaries is looking worried, they paranoid of getting buried/One of us goin’ see the cemetery” (Tupac, 1996, “How Do You Want It”). Clearly, the creative and artistic dimensions add lurid and paranoid colors to the fact that “there’s a nigga trying to kill me.”

Violent carnage was often inserted in between the prosaic aspects of day-to-day life: “I sit down on my bed to watch some TV/(Machine Gun Fire) Do my ears deceive me?/Nope, that’s the fourth time this week/Another fast brother shot dead in the street” (Boogie Down Productions, 1990, “Love’s Gonna Get’Cha”). There was an occasional implication that a typical lifecourse involves knowing people who have been murdered: “My childhood years were spent buryin’ my peers in the cemetery” (Scarface, 1997, “Smile”). Killing was described as a part of daily conversation: “Chillin with the homies, smellin the bud/Double parked and I’m taking to Dub/about who got a plan, who got a plot/whom got got, and who got shot” (Ice Cube, 1994, “You Know How We Did It”).

Perhaps the most striking insertion of homicide into the “everydayness” of living is Ice Cube’s song “It Was a Good Day” (1993) where he describes a series of mundane activities that play out in the course of an ordinary good day: “Then we played bones, and I’m yellin’ domino/Plus nobody I know got killed in South Central L.A./Today was a good day.” Survival is the exception and the absence of homicide in L.A. is a hope for better times.

Part of this normalization of violence involved frequent references to the expectation of not only a certain violent death, but an early death. This inevitability was shrouded in an aura of hopelessness (Dyson, 2001) as well as regret over young people dying. Coolio (1995) raps about the expectation of an early and violent demise.

Death ain’t nuthin but a heartbeat away/I’m livin life do-or-die-a, what can I say?/I’m twenty-three now, but will I live to see twenty-fo’?/The way things is goin I don’t know. (“Gangsta’s Paradise”)

Masculinity and the Romanticization of Violent Death

Rap music is probably best known for its romanticization of a violent lifestyle that is bound up with material success, domination of women, and decadence. What emerged more frequently in our sample of songs was a glorification of killing that was a distinctly masculine affair. This gendered form of control and domination emerged as a distinct type of hypermasculinity: “Fuckin with us/is a straight suicide/Nigga, you got to get mine to get yours” (Redman/Method Man, 1995, “How High”), where in a fundamental way, to be disrespected is to challenge one’s masculinity.

Concurrent themes of contest and confrontation are a part of this masculine expression (Martinez, 1997; Smitherman, 1997). The following examples reveal uncritical glorification of hypermasculine violence in the context of gang-banging: “If you wanna step to my motherfuckin rep’/CH-CH-BLAOW! BLAOW! BLAOW! Blown to death” (Ol’Dirty Bastard, 1995, “Brooklyn Zoo”); “And a nigga wanna test, catch slugs, put’em in the mud/‘cause when you’re fuckin’ with Bone, we sendin’‘em home in a bodybag” (Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, 1997, “Look Into My Eyes”).

This hypermasculine superiority manifested as extreme self-aggrandizement: “My style of rap is legendary/Fuck with the man, then you’ll end up in the cemetery” (Fat Joe, 1993, “Flow Joe”). It is important to keep in mind that rappers create personas and characters, like Alice Cooper or Hannibal Lecter. In some cases, the storyteller pairs superhuman qualities with his willingness to kill (or win a rhyming match): “Fool I’m a vet you can bet/that I can dance underwater and not get wet/it’s the nappy headed nigga that can kill and rap” (Mack 10, 1995, “Foe Life”).

The threat of homicide endowed the storyteller with superior masculine qualities of “toughness”: “From a brother who’s smooth like a criminal/Otherwise known as a villain/Because I’m ruthless/When I spot a sucka, I kill ‘em” (Easy-E, 1989, “We Want Easy”). We uncovered homicide scenarios where the perpetrator had magical killing abilities and invincibility where a life could be snuffed out with ease, grace, and style: “It’s the D-R-E spectacular/In a party I go for your neck so call me Blackula/As I drain a niggaz juglar vein/and maintain to leave blood stains so don’t complain” (Dr. Dre, 1995, “Keep Their Headz Ringin”).

Homicide scenarios in our sample of songs almost exclusively involved men, with only four references to male on female homicide. In one reference to a female victim, the perpetrator was cast as some “lesser” man. In two other examples there was a deep lament of the lost life of a female who was a casualty of ghetto life. We found only one scenario where the rapper himself made direct threats of killing a female. The misogyny in rap music has been well researched (Adams and Fuller, 2006), but with regard to homicide in particular, in this sample of songs, the killing of women was nearly absent. There is a curious gendered double standard in rap music. It is the norm in the rap music genre to objectify women, strip them of their humanity, and reduce their value to sexual property, but for all this degradation, women are never “finished” in rap songs. Violent death is reserved “for men only.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The most popular rap songs taken from Billboard’s rap hit singles, spanning the years 1989 to 2000, have increasingly included lyrics about homicide. In rap songs that included homicide, violent death was constructed in glorified ways, incorporated cautionary tales, and/or used as an analogy for powerful rhyming. The major themes found in these homicide-related rap lyrics were the normalization of killing, respect maintenance, conflict with the power structure, vengeance, and masculine confrontation. The most popular rap music typically depicted homicide as simply a part of life, where fatal violence was regarded with expectation and a constant preoccupation. Rather than homicide in rap being portrayed as unusual, it was more likely to be expressed as a common occurrence. In our sample of rap songs, the threat of homicide was used as a tool in respect maintenance, which was a decidedly hypermasculine display. Homicide was very commonly used as a revenge-seeking tool, both against the power structure and against individuals.

We reemphasize our resistance to classifying homicide-related rap music in "bad" or "harmful" terms. The co-opting of homicide is not exclusive to rap music. Nearly every entertainment genre exploits homicide for commercial and artistic purposes. The study of rap music in particular has likely attracted so much attention because of its egregious violence, virility, misogyny, and graphic nature of the lyrics. Rap music has also tapped into engrained fears of "bad niggas," an identity embraced and flaunted in rap music. Still we do not claim to know the precise source or the social impact of rap music. Although rap music must have some social influence, the extent of its impact on behavior is unknown.

In rap music vernacular, "killing" is sometimes used as an analogy for being a superior rapper. By transforming the meaning of such a widely used term, rap artists have redistributed the power of language. Violence in popular culture has been a virulently contested cultural issue. It is possible that opponents of rap music do not fully understand the variety of meanings that rap artists intend when they evoke images of violent death. Are moral crusaders, researchers, and policymakers in the position to judge and evaluate rap music if their own meanings of words differ wildly from what rap artists intend? Given that the listener filters the lyrics of rap music through his or her own cultural frames of understanding, the study of rap music becomes very important. Only through careful study of rap music can we dismantle one-dimensional assessments about these songs and reveal their complex, poetic, ever-changing meanings.

We do not claim to connect homicide in rap lyrics to "true" homicides, but our research did show that homicide-related rap lyrics in the most commercially popular songs have been increasing during a period of dramatic decline in the actual homicide rate. When rhyming and killing are linked or equated, critics might consider the possibility that rapping could be a ritual substitute for actual violence, a way of transcending it through art, just as successful rappers leave the ghetto.

A substantial amount of literature has focused on the offensive misogynistic lyrics in rap music. It is important to note here that our analysis reveals a distinctly different gendered pattern, where homicides in rap lyrics overwhelmingly involve males killing males, and very rarely describe female victims. This gendered pattern is interesting for what it expresses about the fears, resentments, ideas of masculinity, and terms of satire or protest. These male-on-male homicides emerge as tools to ensure respect from other males, where contests are enacted with the ultimate submission as death. This consistent pattern in our data indicates that the maintenance of respect through violence continues to take on symbolic importance even for affluent rap artists, which presents a bit of a paradox for gender studies researchers.

The sociological literature generally describes the use of violence by men as being rooted in powerlessness and insecurity. Typically, this falls along class lines where lower-class men are more likely to resort to violence. Conversely, where male dominance is stable, there is less need to resort to violence (Hautzinger, 2003). Yet many rap artists have transcended any underclass status and have obtained considerable wealth. What emerges is a status inconsistency where

economic class as well as powerlessness ceases to be a satisfying explanation for violence in rap lyrics. Rap artists, then, are exposing the "shifting terms of marginality" (Rose, 1994:3).

Future research might explore this distinct type of masculinity, the possibility of malleable or changing masculinities in this rap music, how race complicates masculine construction in rap music, and other ways social changes may have brought about a "destabilization" that affect typical or expected gender roles. We add that this is not the first time in history where powerful men have engaged in virile fatal contests (e.g., the legacy of the duel is a historical constant; it is only the social makeup of the actors that seems to change). Male honor is not always bound up with violence, however. So the study of rap music offers an opportunity to explore the unique cultural conditions under which men's masculinity depends so heavily on violence toward other males.

Finally, much of the existing literature has argued that rap music serves as a vehicle for political expression and social change. It is difficult to argue that lyrical compositions involving the violent death of human beings have an ameliorative social effect, but homicide in rap lyrics can expose the tragic side of gangsta/inner-city life. Riley (2005) suggests that the template through which rap music should be interpreted is the "tragic narrative." We did find some rap lyrics in our sample in which homicide was evoked in a socially conscious fashion, and as a plea for change. As moral entrepreneurs frequently attack rap music as invective and socially damaging, it is just as conceivable that depictions of homicide in rap music may have a deterrent effect. Following a tradition of protest and confrontation, rap is frequently regarded as a type of artistic resistance against the inequalities of racist and classist structures. In fact, the reaction elicited by the exaggeration of violence may be one way that power is reclaimed.

Footnotes

3 It is common to see distinctions in rap music by subgenres, such as gangsta rap and battle rap. In this article, we are addressing rap music broadly as a style of music that employs rhythmic speaking along with beats. When addressing the criticisms directed toward rap music, we distinguish between the genre of "rap" and the subgenre, "gangsta rap," given that most criticism has been directed at the latter. The categorical boundaries of "rap music" lyrics that are the subject of analysis in this study were determined by Billboard.

4 It is worthy of note that most of these studies use images of interpersonal violence. In our review of the literature, images of war were far less likely to be used in experiments studying the effect of viewing violent imagery.

5 Since the data for this study begin in 1989, we do not explore this claim in this particular study. We recommend that future researchers examine depictions of homicide in early rap music.

6 In contrast, Tunnel (1995), in his analysis of bluegrass murder ballads, finds that these songs are stories about real events that were preserved in insulated communities and survived over long periods of time.

7 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

8 Billboard changed its language to describe the most popular rap music in 1992 from *top* to *hot*.

9 See http://www.dapslyrics.com, http://www.digital-daydreams.com, http://www.digitaldreamdoor.com, http://www.lyricsfreak.com,http://www.lyrics.com, http://www.lyricsondemand.com, http://www.oldschoolhiphop.com, http://www.seeklyrics.com, http://top40-charts.com, and http://www.ohhla.com.

10 The online dictionary, http://www.urbandictionary.com, has several definitions for murder, one of them being "to completely destroy and embarrass someone lyrically in a freestyle competition or a track."

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