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**GANGSTA MISOGYNY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE  
PORTRAYALS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN RAP  
MUSIC, 1987-1993\***

**by**

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**ABSTRACT**

Gangsta rap music is often identified with violent and misogynist lyric portrayals. This article presents the results of a content analysis of gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics. The gangsta rap music domain is specified and the work of thirteen artists as presented in 490 songs is examined. A main finding is that 22% of gangsta rap music songs contain violent and misogynist lyrics. A deconstructive interpretation suggests that gangsta rap music is necessarily understood within a context of patriarchal hegemony.

**INTRODUCTION**

Theresa Martinez (1997) argues that rap music is a form of oppositional culture that offers a message of resistance, empowerment, and social critique. But this cogent and lyrical exposition intentionally avoids analysis of explicitly misogynist and sexist lyrics. The present study begins where Martinez leaves off: a content analysis of gangsta rap's lyrics and a classification of its violent and misogynist messages. First, the gangsta rap music domain is specified. Next, the prevalence and seriousness of overt episodes of violent and misogynist lyrics are documented. This involves the identification of attributes and the construction of meaning through the use of crime categories. Finally, a deconstructive interpretation is offered in which gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics are explicated in terms of the symbolic encoding of gender relationships.

## THEORY

Postmodern perspectives share the view that "culture is reality" ([Kotarba 1994: 148](#)). Signifiers are signs in themselves that take on a life of their own ([Manning 1995](#)). Speech is seen as action; a text is axiomatically an ethnography ([Van Maanen 1995](#)). Postmodern criminologists attend to the meaning of what is said or written as expressed [**End page 96**] by the language one uses and show that different positions in the justice system (e.g., police, drug dealers, court officials) have their own language systems ([Vold, Bernard, and Snipes 1998](#)). The sociological study of deviant behavior anticipated the contention that language, as symbolic interaction, is behavior itself ([Bryant 1982](#)). Postmodernism draws attention to the increasing role of symbolic violence in shaping interpersonal relations ([Manning and Singh 1997](#)). But feminist theory has taken a more fully developed textual turn, emphasizing the discursive construction of social reality ([Smith 1990](#); [McClary 1991](#); [Klimenkova 1992](#); [Alway 1995](#); [Mumby 1996](#); [Kasinky 1998](#)). Language is a constitutive force that creates a particular view of reality ([Richardson 1991](#)). Words are acts, essentially the practices they constitute rather than the expressions of the ideas they embody ([MacKinnon 1993](#)). The theory of discursive violence problematizes the distinction between words and deeds and attends to the real-world anguish of the verbally abused. This is not to say that real rape and its fictional representation are equally grave offenses ([Douglas 1995](#)). But as the physiological effects of discursive violence make evident, "linguistic violence is in fact a form of physical violence" ([Gorsevski 1998: 513](#)). More to the point: sexual and violent imagery "indeed *is* violence against women" ([Levine 1992: 146](#)).

The postmodern and feminist vision holds that words, music, and other discourses are performative utterances that instantiate a condition or state of affairs ([Swidler 1996](#)). One variant of this viewpoint: the Equal Opportunity Commission's guidelines defining sexual harassment under Title VII includes verbal conduct – words that can poison a workplace or classroom ([Dooling 1996](#)). A key element of the idea of "hate speech" is the understanding that people do things with words, that speech acts assault their victims ([Walker 1994](#)). Violent metaphors are not simply figures of speech ([Eisikovits and Buchbinder 1997](#)). Rappers create a commercially available everyday reality and it is in accordance with the lyrics provided by gangsta rap music that individuals structure their perceptions.<sup>1</sup>

## DATA AND METHODS

When a text accompanies music it provides an explicit conceptual framework that answers questions concerning musical meaning and social significance ([Miles 1995](#)). Postmodern sociological readings of music begin with the centrality of the text – the lyrical narrative ([Kotarba 1994](#)). The nature of rap music dictates just such a concentration on language. Rap's harmonies are "simple," based on one tonality as defined by a simple bass line ([Bitz 1998](#)). Instead, the genre is predicated on lyric content ([Roberts 1994](#); [Guevara 1996](#)), that is, the power of the word ([Keyes 1996](#); [Smitherman 1997](#)). Words are spoken, not sung ([Dixon 1989](#); [Edwards and Sienkewicz 1991](#); [Shusterman 1991](#); [Cawker 1994](#)). Ray Charles comments that rap is just "talk with music" (quoted in [Silver 1997: 76](#)). Public Enemy's Chuck D even declares that "rap is a vocal culture" and "is not music per se" (quoted in [Chambers and Morgan 1992: 85](#)). Snoop Doggy Dogg (now just Snoop Dogg) summarizes the nature of his raps in these terms: "I just be conversatin'" ("Week In Rock," MTV, 9/12/93). Rappers avoid word **[End page 97]** play and metaphor, substituting instead the communication of straightforward meaning ([Dimitriadis 1996](#)), and they eschew lyrical subtlety ([Danaher and Blackwelder 1993](#)). Nearly all raps are first-person narratives, retellings of what the artists (allegedly) have seen or done, recounts of events that happened personally and specifically to them ([Light 1992](#); [Steaman 1992](#); [Rose 1994b](#); [Allen 1996](#); [Kelley 1996](#); [Perkins 1996](#); [Barrett 1999](#); [Snoop Dogg 1999](#)). This self-referential quality is central to gangsta rap music. In gangsta rap music, the first-person point of view brings both the narrator and the listener into the heart of modern urban terror ([Gilmore and Karl 1990](#)). By telling their tales in the first-person, rappers appear to commit themselves to the worst impulses in their scenarios.

Rap is best understood as verbal art ([Keyes 1984](#); [Jeremiah 1992](#)).<sup>2</sup> The nature of rap facilitates its content analysis, the transcription and interpretation of lyrics. Postmodern ethnographies are a kind of content analysis because they describe textual imagery by comparing and contrasting the meanings of the elements of a code ([Manning 1991](#)). A genre such as gangsta rap music is a code in itself ([Dunbar-Hall 1991](#)). This interest in codes parallels the ethnomusicological concern with collections, the raw material that is a prerequisite for establishing the set of traits that combine to convey an image of a genre ([Nettl 1964](#); [Davis 1992](#)). Ethnomusicologists divide the collection of songs into smaller, more homogeneous groups ([Nettl 1964](#)). The research enterprise moves to classificatory analysis, a systematic paradigmization of units ([Nattiez 1990](#)). Both ethnomusicology and postmodern ethnography are accomplished by classification and categorization ([Manning 1995](#)). In this

article the collection is constituted by songs manifesting violent and misogynist lyrics. Content analysis is used to determine whether a song depicts violent and misogynist lyrics and, if so, the kind of crime and the nature of the violence portrayed. To begin, however, a specification of the gangsta rap music domain is needed.

## COLLECTION AND CLASSIFICATION

Lyrics were gathered from 490 songs produced by thirteen artists from 1987 to 1993. Following ethnomusicological guidelines ([Nettl 1995](#)), attention is directed toward artists who provide gangsta rap music's "central repertory" and who are considered gangsta rap music's "ruling class." The criteria applied in establishing this repertorial centrality are historical priority, popularity, and reputation – a function of cultural criticism. Part of the present analysis is occupied with specifying membership in the gangsta rap music domain.

The history of gangsta rap music begins with Ice-T ([McAdams 1992](#); [Rose 1994b](#)).<sup>3</sup> His "6 'N The Morning" (1987) served as the blueprint for the gangsta rap music style ([Ice-T 1994](#)). But two groups, [N.W.A](#) (Niggaz Wit Attitude) and the [Geto Boys](#), and the spin-off solo careers of their members, eclipsed Ice-T's success. N.W.A billed itself as "the World's Most Dangerous Group." The late [Eazy-E](#) founded the group. Until [Ice Cube](#) left the group in early 1990, he served as its chief lyricist ([Nelson and Gonzales 1991](#)). [End page 98] [MC Ren](#) acted as the group's hardcore center ([Nelson 1993](#)). [Dr. Dre](#), N.W.A's non-rapping producer, coined the term gangsta rap music to refer to the albums he produced ([Gold 1993](#)). In 1991, their [Efil4zaggin](#) (Niggaz4life spelled backwards) became the first gangsta rap music album to reach No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts. In 1992, Dre's *The Chronic* became the most popular gangsta rap music album. Only a year later, Snoop Doggy Dogg's [DoggyStyle](#), which Dre produced, surpassed *The Chronic*. Snoop's album, the first by a solo artist to reach No. 1 prior to its release, sold over 4.5 million copies and made him the best-known rapper ([Pareles 1995](#)). Unlike N.W.A, members of the Geto Boys had separate careers until joined together in a business partnership. In 1990, their [Grip It On The Other Level](#) sold more than 500,000 copies without major-label sponsorship or radio air play ([Kot 1990](#)). The Geto Boys spawned multiple solo successes: [Bushwick Bill](#), [Scarface](#), and [Willie D](#). They also collaborate with the members of [Too Much Trouble](#), a group with the allonym, "The Baby Geto Boys." [Too \\$hort](#), another artist of eminence, added a sense of humor to the gangsta rap music pose ([Nelson and Gonzales 1991](#)). At the mid-point of the 1990s, Too \$hort was the largest-selling rap artist ([Perkins 1996](#)).

Temporal limitations to the specification of the gangsta rap music domain are central. When gangsta rap music reached the height of its popularity, Luther Campbell (formerly Luke Skyywalker), founder of 2 Live Crew, Hammer (formerly M. C. Hammer) and Vanilla Ice ([Jones 1994a](#); "Week In Rock," MTV, 4/24/94), artists who had fallen on hard times, advanced "tougher" stances and demanded categorization within gangsta rap music's stylistic boundaries. Because of the expanding nature of membership, only the foundational period of gangsta rap music, from 1987 to 1993, is assessed (see [Appendix A](#) below for a gangsta rap music discography).<sup>4</sup>

Questioning the frequency and the nature of presented themes is the first concern of a media researcher ([Altheide 1997](#)). Of course, violence ranges in severity from an intimidating look and harsh words to rape and murder ([Berger 1994](#)). As members of the renowned Cultural Indicators Project point out, the way violence is defined directly determines the amount and nature of the violence that is isolated ([Signorielli, Gerbner, and Morgan 1995](#)). Here attention is limited to three serious personal offenses directed at women: assault, forcible rape, and murder, and a fourth category combining rape and murder. Analysis of lyric content shows that 22 percent (N = 107) of the 490 gangsta rap music songs had violent and misogynist lyrics. Assault was the most frequently occurring criminal offense, portrayed in 50 percent of the violent and misogynist songs. Other rankings: rape only = 11 percent; murder only = 31 percent; rape and murder = 7 percent. [Table One](#) presents a breakdown of the variety of violent and misogynist lyrics by artist. But categorization according to crime type does not reveal the manner in which violent and misogynist lyrics are presented. Because similar kinds of violent and misogynist lyrics have different meanings, the messages inherent in the lyrics need specification. A way of deconstructing these meanings is by detailing the manner in which the criminal acts are depicted. [End page 99]

## DESCRIPTION OF VIOLENT AND MISOGYNIST LYRIC CONTENT

### *Assault*

Ice-T's ([1987](#)) "6 'N The Mornin'" and Eazy-E's ([1988a](#); [1993](#); and [N.W.A's](#) [1989b]) "Boyz-N-The-Hood" anticipated and affected gangsta rap music's matter-of-fact depictions of violence and misogyny. These songs gave thematic centrality to assault and signaled the coming age of



gender-based conflict as a staple of the genre. In "6 'N The Mornin'", Ice-T batters a woman, heretofore a stranger, because she called him a name. "Boyz-N-The-Hood" suggests corporal punishment for women who "talk shit." Dr. Dre (1992) presents the identical message in "Nuthin' But A 'G' Thang," the No. 1 rap song of all time (Krohn and Suazo 1995). Talking back (Ice-T 1989a; Too \$hort 1987b and 1993d) and showing disrespect (dissin') (N.W.A 1991b) cause men to react violently. MC Ren (1992b) hits, with a shoe, women who complain. Rejecting a proposition provokes a physical attack (Eazy-E 1992b). Too \$hort (1993a) hurled this tirade:

You fuck with us, bitch, something gettin' broken  
Your leg, arm, jaw, nose, pick a part.

In N.W.A's (1989a) "A Bitch Iz A Bitch," money-hungry or stuck-up women are subsumed under the same solution: "Slam her ass in a ditch." Too \$hort slaps women who act "shitty" (1988b) or bold (1992b). Responses to mental slowness are equally harsh. Bushwick Bill (1992c) kicks a woman's ass if her "brain don't click." By choosing the wrong friends, "bitches" either "need stitches" (Willie D 1992b) or get drop-kicked (Ice-T 1993). Personal characteristics also induce violence. In "Punk Bitch," Too \$hort (1990b) expresses his desire to slap all bald-headed women. Ice-T (1991b) pushes a woman to the floor because "she looked like Godzilla." Because a woman had "more crabs than a sea-food platter," Eazy-E (1988e) "slapped the ho" and proudly proclaimed himself a "woman-beater." The Geto Boys (1993d) handed down comparable excesses when they threw an "unsanitary bitch" into a ditch.

Violence and criminality are linked. The Geto Boys (1990g) kick a female employee for not quickly complying with their commands during a robbery. Ice-T (1987) mentions another woman's positioning as the object of opposition to drug use. A homeboy broke his girlfriend's jaw "for smokin' cane." The desire for drugs even destroys a parent-child relationship. Snoop Doggy Dogg (1993b) meets a woman who wants to take over her daughter's source of drugs – Snoop himself. The mother hits her child "in the face" and punches her "in the eye" and "in the belly."

Pimp-prostitute associations are the locales of violent and misogynist lyrics. In documentary fashion, Too Much Trouble depict themselves as pandering pimps in seven selections from their album, *Players Choice*. The lyrics of five of these songs are formulaic – workers get "smacked" if they fail to meet their financial quotas (1993a; b; c; g; and h). [End page 100] Ice Cube (1990c) recommends similar actions. Alternatively, in "Little Hooker," Willie D (1992a) beats a young girl because she became a

prostitute.

Intimate relationships are also riddled with violence. When one's "lady," as opposed to one's "bitch," talks to another man, she gets physically punished ([Geto Boys 1990f](#)). Tardy breakfasts are hard to handle. Violence accompanies the command to put some "eggs in the goddamn skillet" ([Too Much Trouble 1992c](#)). Identification of rappers as putative parents generates physical responses. Ice Cube ([1990b](#)) plans to end a pregnancy by kicking a woman "in the tummy" and by looking in a closet "for the hanger." The Geto Boys ([1989a and 1990b](#)) handle a false accusation of paternity by trying to break the woman's neck. Too \$hort ([1993d](#)) deals with a similar situation by surprising the woman "like a mack" and then dropping "her ass off at Kaiser [hospital]." Women are hit ([Ice Cube 1993](#)), slapped ([Too \\$hort 1988a and 1990c](#)), tossed ([Eazy-E 1988d](#)), thrown into a trunk ([Too \\$hort 1992c](#)), smacked ([Too Much Trouble 1993f](#); [Too \\$hort 1988e](#)) and kicked ([Too \\$hort 1990d](#)), all for no apparent reason. For instance, Too Much Trouble ([1993d](#)) mention only that "a bitch is just like glass – easy to break." N.W.A ([1988a and 1989c](#)) tell of a woman who "got a black eye cause the dope man hit her." Bushwick Bill ([1992d](#)), in his autobiographical "Ever So Clear," travels to the home of the women "closest" to him. Upon arriving, he "provoked her, punched her, kicked, and choked her." After trying to throw her baby out a window, he's shot in the eye. (Until the releases of Eminem's *Slim Shady LP* (1999) and *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000), this was gangsta rap music's only mention of infanticide.) Marriage is also depicted with violent and misogynist lyrics. Consider "Bitches 2," where Ice-T ([1991a](#)) mentions a friend who regularly "kicks his wife's ass." Too \$hort's ([1992d](#)) domestic sexual encounters begin when he whips "ass like a world champ." Violent and misogynist lyrics also take the form of overly aggressive and rough sex. Scarface ([1991b](#)) brags that "bitches walk out of the crib with a limp," while Ice Cube ([1992a](#)) nearly breaks "that thing in half" during sex with a new partner. Too Much Trouble ([1993e](#)) say that after oral sex, they "leave some stretch marks" on a woman's jaw. Ice-T ([1989b](#)) attests to the actions of Evil E who "fucked the bitch with a flashlight." Because he left the batteries in, "the bitch's titties started blinkin' like tail lights."

## ***Rape***

Willie D ([1989b](#)) and Too \$hort ([1993c](#)) advocate raping women who do not submit to their sexual advances. Another rape narrative has Too \$hort ([1987d](#)) beating his victim's "ass with a billy-club." In "She Swallowed It," N.W.A ([1991d](#)) recommend specific procedures for attacking a fourteen-year-old:

Punch the bitch in the eye/then the ho will fall to the  
ground  
Then you open up her mouth/put your dick, move the  
shit around. [End page 101]

Ice-T ([Body Count 1992a](#)) proposes sex "with Tipper Gore's two twelve-year-old nieces." This is a clear case of seeking revenge against one of the founders of the Parents' Music Resources Center (PMRC).

The substance of the rape songs becomes far more execrable than the criminal category ostensibly prefigures. Eazy-E ([1988c](#)), Snoop Doggy Dogg ([1993a](#)), and Too \$hort ([1990b](#)) casually mention gang rapes. MC Ren ([1992a](#)) tells of "ten niggas" who rape a child and then violate her with a broomstick. In Ice Cube's ([1991](#)) "Givin' Up The Nappy Dug Out," "fourteen niggas" line up to take turns placing themselves "two on top, one on the bottom" of an underage girl. Too \$hort conceives of an array of alternatives in his consideration of the pluses and minuses of statutory rape. In "She's A Bitch" ([1987c](#)), he adapts a crude aphorism: "Fourteen, fifteen, all the way up/if she can bleed then she can fuck." He recites similar words in "Hoes" ([1992a](#)). But in "Little Girls" ([1988c](#)), after an attempted rape fails, he rallies against sex with children.

### ***Murder***

Although the police targeted Too Much Trouble ([1993i](#)), they mistakenly shot and killed a "bitch." Other songs by Too Much Trouble have women dying in defense of personal possessions ([1992b](#)) and their employers' property ([1992a](#)). During another robbery, one "old bitch got her neck broke" ([1992e](#)). MC Ren ([1993a](#)) shoots a woman who set him up to be robbed. In "To Kill A Hooker," N.W.A ([1991f](#)) drag a streetwalker into a car and kill her because she demanded money in exchange for sex. Women are also murdered for choosing the wrong companion ([Eazy-E 1992a](#)), becoming nosy ([Geto Boys 1993c](#)), and for remaining silent. Ice Cube ([1992b](#)) fed a girl to the wolves because the "little ho had no words." Three other personal traits stimulate violent and misogynist lyrics. N.W.A's ([1989d](#)) Eazy-E tied to kill a "fat girl" with an elephant gun. When that didn't work, he "grabbed a harpoon" and left the woman on the avenue "like a beached whale." MC Ren ([1993b](#)) mulls over shooting and burying a "bitch" whose "pussy really stinks" and who has "crabs on her pussy." In "Bald Headed Hoes," Willie D ([1989a](#)) proposes "a bill on Capitol Hill to kill all bald-headed women at will." Rappers plan murders to pay back women who, in their opinion, did something wrong.



Transgressions include telling a lie ([Scarface 1993](#)), failing to make bail ([Eazy-E 1988b](#)), transmitting a venereal disease ([Geto Boys 1988 and 1990a](#); [N.W.A 1990](#)), calling the cops ([N.W.A 1991e](#)), and cheating. N.W.A's ([1991c](#)) surprise discovery of a cheating mate propel them to dump the unfaithful partner, now wearing cement shoes, into a river. Willie D ([1989c](#)) and the Geto Boys ([1993a](#)) also kill cheaters.

Two Too \$hort ([1988d and 1990a](#)) songs tell of killing women but never offer a hint at what precipitated the acts. Bushwick Bill ([1992a](#)) simply brags that he is the "neighborhood bitch slayer." The Geto Boys ([1989b and 1990c](#)) recommend putting "a ho in front of a trigger." Without supplying any explanation, N.W.A ([1991a](#)) mention taking the life of a wife and daughter. N.W.A ([1988b](#)) also recollect "bitches" that they have shot and announce their plans to "smother" someone's mother. The Geto Boys kill a **[End page 102]** person's wife "for kicks" ([1993b](#)) and pump anonymous women "full of lead" ([1989d and 1990e](#)). Scarface ([1991a](#)) recounts the same senseless killings. Songs combining murder and mutilation exemplify a virulent positioning of women as objects of violence. The Geto Boys ([1991](#)) attack someone's nieces and cut the girls' heads into "88 pieces." Bushwick Bill ([1992b](#)) recalls this incident in a song where his breakfast menu is "bacon and legs." Ice-T ([Body Count, 1992b](#)) sets his mother on fire, beats her to death with a baseball bat, and cuts up her body. In a Geto Boys' ([1988 and 1990a](#)) act of murder, the weapon of choice is a machete: "I sliced her up until her guts were like spaghetti."

### ***Rape and Murder***

Too Much Trouble ([1992d](#)) kill an elderly rape victim whom they caught crawling for the telephone. First, they hit her on the head with a hammer, and the sound of a hammer hitting someone's head accompany the lyrics. Then they "beat her head with the phone until her skull caved in." An operator's recorded message echoes in the background. Too \$hort ([1987a and 1993b](#)) slaps a young girl to convince her to perform oral sex after which the child dies: "She choked on sperm in her windpipe." In "One Less Bitch," N.W.A ([1991c](#)) tie a woman to a bed, rape, and then shoot her. Compared to the lyrics that follow, this song seems almost benign. The Geto Boys ([1989c and 1990d](#)) produced two versions of their signature song, "Mind Of A Lunatic." Both begin by noting the identical initial actions of a peeping tom turned rapist. In one, the perpetrator cuts the victim's throat and watches her "shake like on TV." The second version heightens the macabre as the killer has "sex with the corpse." In a different song, Bushwick Bill ([1992e](#)) recites the same lyrics. Another Geto

Boys' (1993c) song depicts a similar rape/murder, only this time they slit the woman "like a pig."

## RESULTS

This project is an initial move to fill an analytical void. Although lyrics are a most accessible kind of text, feminist semiologists have neglected this area (Bayton 1992). Scholars have been particularly slow to analyze and critique gangsta rap music's content (Williams 1992). On the one hand, gangsta rap music has been identified with its violent and misogynist lyrics. At the beginning of the decade, *Billboard* (1991) editorialized against gangsta rap music because it purveyed a "gangsta ideology," an unabashed espousal of violence and misogyny. A *New York Times* (Staples 1993) editorial did likewise. C. DeLores Tucker, chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women and the most famous opponent of gangsta rap music, considers the genre a profane and obscene glorification of murder and rape (Waldron 1996). Gangsta rap music, according to Tucker, is more suitably called "gangsta porno rap" (Kramer 1997). On the other hand, the notion that gangsta rap music manifests violent and misogynist lyrics is condemned as the myth of aural violence (Maxwell 1991).<sup>5</sup> This research establishes the frequency and describes the details of gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics frame, where physical aggression is presented as a way of dealing with women and handling male-female interaction. An immediate consequence of this content [End page 103] analysis is a "both/and" resolution to the debate – "only" 22 percent of gangsta rap music songs dealt with violent and misogynist lyrics.

Another result of this study is to challenge prevailing wisdom on the existential basis for gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics. Verbal deviance has commercial configurations (Bryant 1982). Late capitalism promotes sexual and violent cultural industries (Denzin 1985). Yo Yo clarifies the issue with regard to gangsta rap music: "The harder that you are, sad to say, the more you sell" (quoted in Jones 1993: 6D). Allegedly, rappers created gangsta rap music when their focus shifted from music to money and they discovered that the best way to make money was to rap about sex and violence (Salaam 1995). Bill Stephney, rap historian and CEO of Stepsun Entertainment, underscores the issue by claiming that the marketplace and capitalism motivate what gangsta rappers do and don't do ("Gangsta Rap," MTV, 9/13/94). Here we have numerous indictments of the "greed-artists" of gangsta rap music (Shocked and Bull 1992: 6) and the gangsta rap music's "shock-for-sales rantings" (Jones 1994b: 10D). Not surprisingly, a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* agrees with this

contention and supplies a quotation from rap producer David Dickerson as further evidence: "The sad truth is the harder the rapper's image, the more music they sell" ([Pulley 1994: A1](#)). But the present analysis contradicts the direct association between violent and misogynist lyrics and popularity in three ways. First, assault, the least serious of the specified criminal acts, is the modal violent and misogynist lyrics category. Next, the least popular gangsta rap music group has the highest frequency of violent and misogynist songs. Too Much Trouble, the Baby Geto Boys, are far less commercially successful than other representatives of the genre. Finally, Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg, the two premier gangsta rap music artists, combine for only three of the 107 cases of violent and misogynist lyrics.

## DISCUSSION

A deconstructive reading of gangsta rap music's lyric content immediately suggests the core element of the gangsta rap music domain. As with other European-American popular songs, interpretations of gangsta rap music must fall within the context of, and as contributing to, patriarchal hegemony ([Davis 1998](#)). Indeed, every variety of Western music, including classical symphonies and opera, is an almost exclusively male domain ([McClary 1991](#)). Rock lyrics are lopsidedly male, circumscribed by male dominance over women ([Pattison 1987](#)). Punk rock retained misogynist imagery ([Levine 1992](#)). Paralleling rock's sexism, rap is a haven of male hegemony ([Guevara 1996](#)). To begin, recall that gangsta rap music is self-referential. The self-referential reportage that frames the gangsta rap music enterprise is initial evidence for gangsta rap music's essential sexism. This kind of presentation of self is characterized as a "masculinization" of ethnographic narrative. Literary scholars note a strong male proclivity toward elaborating their life stories in order to project a poised self-image ([Tedlock 1995](#)). The self images that women's memoirs project are often an understated and fragmentary clarification of personalities detached from (male) self-glorification. Further, narratives **[End page 104]** are cultural stories that have real holds on the imaginations of men and women. When the cultural stories are told from the point of view of the male, the central character in the patriarchal system, they reaffirm the status quo ([Richardson 1995](#)). In gangsta rap music, as elsewhere, relations of power over sex are maintained through language ([Foucault 1980](#)). Part of the ongoing work of gender construction occurs within the gangsta rap music arena. Gangsta rap music is a constitutive element in a complex web of meaning formation and power relations.

The hegemonic dimension of gangsta rap music's narratives is immediate evidence of a rape culture ([Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 1993](#)). In fact, gangsta rap music is a "celebration" of rape culture and its most powerful contemporary voice ([hooks 1993](#)). A rape culture is a complex of beliefs supporting a continuum of threatened violence against women that ranges from sexual remarks to rape itself. It is a "generic culture," part of the social construction of gender, how individuals "do gender" ([Boswell and Spade 1996](#)). When members of the National Political Congress of Black Women staged a protest outside a store selling gangsta rap music, one of the marchers carried a sign with the slogan, "Gangsta Rap Is Rape" ([Herrmann 1994](#)). Minimally, gangsta rap music's typifications of violent and misogynist lyrics are rather dramatic examples of what Dworkin ([1981](#)) terms the male use of language as violence. Deconstructing gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics, the symbolic working toward the denigration of women, enables its reevaluation.

## CONCLUSION

Recently, two syndicated columnists have linked social problems directly to gangsta rap music's foundational period. For Leonard Pitts ([1999](#)) of the *Miami Herald*, gangsta rap music helped promote urban decline by romanticizing value-free visions, which included a celebration of women pimping in a scabrous and explicit way. For Stanley Crouch ([2000](#)) of New York's *Daily News*, gangsta rap music, beginning with N.W.A's 1989 arrival, caused a decline in American values and promoted the way thugs and sluts live by "any means necessary." What these writers could not have known was that gangsta rap music in the year 2000 would make prior lyrical presentations seem tame.

In 2000, gangsta rap music continued to dominate rap music. Its popularity was such that Pareles ([2000](#)) categorized artists offering an alternative to gangsta rap music as part of the "non-gangsta wing of hip-hop." The "Up in Smoke" tour, featuring Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, and Eminem, became the most popular rap tour ever. The show even presented a reunited and reconstituted version of N.W.A with Snoop Dogg replacing the late Eazy-E. Moreover, Eminem's *Slim Shady LP*, which Dr. Dre produced, won the Grammy for the best rap album of 1999. In the *Slim Shady LP*, women are killed by guns and knives and by an innovative means, such as poisoning. Further, violent and misogynist lyrics are enhanced by an act of infanticide. Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* became the fastest selling rap album of all time. Violent and misogynist

lyrics are [End page 105] found in eleven of the album's fourteen songs. Worse still, nine of the eleven songs depict killing women, with drowning becoming a new *modus operandi*. Comparing the lyric content of gangsta rap music's foundational period with that of Eminem shows the following: In terms of violent and misogynist lyrics, gangsta rap music (1987-1993) scores a 22 percent while Eminem (2000) reaches 78 percent. Concerning the percent of the violent and misogynist lyrics dealing with women's murder: gangsta rap music (1987-1993) yields 31 percent and Eminem (2000) 82 percent. As a reward for extending the presence of violent and misogynist lyric content beyond his musical progenitors, Eminem has made the cover of *Rolling Stone* (8/3/00), *The Source* (7/00) and *Spin* (8/00). Gangsta rap music continues to teach, promote, and glamorize violence and misogyny (Bok 1999). Introduction of discursive vehicles for unlearning, resisting, and deglamorizing violent and misogynist lyrics has become more important than ever with the increasing popularity of the gangsta rap music genre. [End page 106]

## ENDNOTES

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1. The question, "Does rap music contribute to violent crime?," is the subject of scholarly debate (see, for example, [Martin, 1998](#) versus [Hamm and Ferrell 1998](#)). Research confirms that listening to gangsta rap music motivates sexual aggression ([Barongan and Nagayama Hall 1995](#); [Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, and Reed 1995](#); [Johnson, Jackson, and Gatto 1995](#)) and inappropriate behavior ([Harris, Bradley, and Titus 1992](#)). Wester, Crown, Quatman, and Heesacker (1997) found that gangsta rap music lyrics significantly increased men's adversarial sexual beliefs. Other studies, however, fail to find any causal link between rap lyric content and behavior problems ([Epstein, Pratto, and Skipper 1990](#); [Took and Weiss 1994](#)). Likewise, the hypothesis that rap lyrics cause either anxiety or suicidal ideation has been experimentally rejected ([Ballard and Coates 1995](#)). Attempts to link rap and violence are critically categorized as part of the so-called "danger to society frame" that allegedly emphasizes that rap creates legions of misogynist listeners who are a danger to women ([Binder 1993](#)).



2. Historically, rap is part of an oral heritage and as such preserves the cultural past of West African slaves whose flowery language was the sign of the speaker's verbal skill and of the social code shared by the oral community ([Edwards and Sienkewicz 1991](#); [Stephens 1991](#); [Perkins 1996](#); [Smitherman 1997](#)). Attention to rap as verbal art leads to deliberations on the production of the object, explorations of the art form as socially contingent. Here rap is seen as an articulation of contemporary black culture ([Pressley 1992](#); [West 1993](#)), black nationalism ([Muwakkil 1992](#); [Decker 1993](#); [Henderson 1996](#)), and the socio-economic problems encountered by inner-city youth ([Baker 1993](#); [Berry 1994](#); [Kelley 1996](#); [Keyes 1996](#); [McCall 1997](#)).

3. Philadelphia artist Schoolly-D is also considered the original gangsta rapper ([Jackson 1994](#)) and the producer of the seminal hardcore release ([Nelson and Summers 1993](#)), but Schoolly D has not been commercially successful and remains virtually unknown ([Jackson 1994](#)). Cross ([1993](#)) believes that Schoolly D and Boogie Down Productions (BDP) were at gangsta rap music's vanguard. BDP's KRS-One, however, quickly moved to espousals of political and non-violent agendas. Another candidate for inclusion is the late Tupac Shakur (2Pac/Makaveli). But Tupac stressed that he was "a thug" not a gangsta rapper ("Gangsta Rap," MTV, 9/13/94). His violent recitations were never directed at women and many of his raps dealt with the elevation of women's status ([Watts 1997](#)). During Tupac's funeral, Naughty By Nature's Treach emphasized that Tupac "weren't no gangsta" ([Rhyme & Reason 1997](#)). [End page 107]

4. Gangsta rap music underwent other changes as well. In 1995, Ice-T, gangsta rap music's progenitor, ceased using gangsta rap music to describe his music ([McLaren 1995](#)). A year later, Dr. Dre, the artist/producer who coined the term "gangsta rap," announced that the musical style was "over" (MTV 9/2/96), that it had "run its course" (quoted in [Samuels and Gates 1996](#)), that gangsta rap music "is definitely a thing of the past" (quoted in [Reilly 1996: B2](#)). A book published during December, 1996, was entitled *Gangsta Rap Is Dead* ([Osayande 1996](#)). In 1997, Death Row Records, the genre's key label, started to unravel, dismantling gangsta rap music's most potent artist lineup ([Branch 1997](#)). A common viewpoint was that the "reign" of gangsta rap music had ended ([Klein 1998](#)) and that gangsta rap music was "in ruins" ([Smith 1997](#)). But after a mid-decade sales dip, the genre's popularity increased dramatically ([Clark-Meads and Legrand 1998](#)). Both Ice-T ([James 1999](#)) and Dr. Dre ([Pareles 1999](#)) returned to their gangsta rap music roots and reclaimed their places at the center of the gangsta rap music enterprise. In 1998, rap became America's

top-selling format and because of this, *Time* labeled the United States the "hip-hop nation" (Farley 1999). After accessing the global popularity of the music, *The Christian Science Monitor* disagreed, finding not just a hip-hop nation but a "hip-hop world" (Terry 1999). Gangsta rap music still remains the most popular of rap's major categories (Pinn 1999).

5. Many commentators challenge the notion that gangsta rap music has violent and misogynist lyrical content. For Wahl (1999) gangsta rap music offers only a "seeming" glorification of violence and misogyny. Kitwana (1994) calls critics of gangsta rap music "uninformed" and suggests that they should listen to the music. Rose (1994a) finds that opponents of gangsta rap music operate out of genuine ignorance when they give their shallow readings of gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics. Gladney (1995) claims that critics fail to analyze the lyrics critically and intellectually. Dyson (1993) sees negative appraisals of gangsta rap music as rooted in a shallow understanding of rap which results from an unwillingness to listen to the lyrics. During one conference, rappers and their fans criticized noted psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint, claiming that he disparaged rap without having listened to it (Williams 1992). Keyes (1996) concludes that gangsta rap music's critics cannot "decode" its language. Potter (1995) and Yancy (1997) hold that criticisms of gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics unfairly remove the lyrics from their "context." According to Rosen and Marks (1999), gangsta rap music's violent and misogynist lyrics are "parodic signifying." The lyrics are humorous poetic contrivances. [End page 108]

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## APPENDIX A

### Discography of Gangsta Rap, 1987 to 1993

Body Count [Ice-T]. 1992a. "KKK Bitch." *Body Count*. Sire/Warner Brothers. 9 26878-4.

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-----, 1989b. "Let A Ho Be A Ho." *Grip It On That Other Level*. Rap-A-Lot. 34744-0103-2.

-----, 1989c. "Mind Of A Lunatic." *Grip It On That Other Level*. Rap-A-Lot. 34744-0103-2.

-----, 1989d. "Scarface." *Grip It On That Other Level*. Rap-A-Lot. 34744-0103-2.

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-----, 1990d. "Mind Of A Lunatic." *The Geto Boys*. Def American. 9 24306-4.

-----, 1990e. "Scarface." *The Geto Boys*. Def American. 9 24306-4.

-----, 1990f. "Talkin' Loud Ain't Saying Nothin'." *The Geto Boys*. Def American. 9 24306-4.

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- , 1988d. "Mack Attack." *Born To Mack*. Jive/RCA. 1100-1-J. **[End page 123]**
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**TABLE ONE**

**Gangsta Rap Artists and Violent/Misogynist (V/M) Lyrics**

<i>Artist</i>	<i>Number of Songs</i>	<i>Number with V/M Lyrics (% Total Songs)</i>	<i>Lyrical Portrayals of Assault (% V/M)</i>	<i>Lyrical Portrayals of Rape (% V/M)</i>	<i>Lyrical Portrayals of Murder (% V/M)</i>	<i>Lyrical Portrayals of Rape and Murder (% V/M)</i>
Bushwick Bill	12	5 (42%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)
Dr. Dre	16	1 (6%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Eazy-E	25	8 (32%)	5 (20%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)
Geto Boys	65	17 (26%)	5 (29%)	0 (0%)	9 (53%)	3 (18%)
Ice Cube	69	6 (9%)	4 (67%)	1 (17%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)
Ice-T	83	8 (10%)	6 (75%)	1 (13%)	1 (13%)	0 (0%)
MC Ren	16	4 (25%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)
N.W.A.	42	13 (31%)	5 (38%)	1 (8%)	6 (46%)	1 (8%)
Scarface	29	3 (10%)	1 (33%)	0 (0%)	2 (67%)	0 (0%)
Snoop Doggy Dogg	16	2 (13%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Too Much Trouble	29	14 (48%)	9 (64%)	0 (0%)	4 (29%)	1 (7%)
Too \$hort	60	21 (35%)	12 (57%)	5 (24%)	2 (9%)	2 (9%)
Willie D	28	5 (18%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)
Totals	490	107	54 (50%)	12 (11%)	33 (31%)	8 (7%)

		(22%)				
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**[End page 126]**