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I May Not Get There With You

The True Martin Luther King, Jr.

Michael Eric Dyson

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“I Have Walked Among the Desperate,
Rejected, and Angry”
Two Generations of the Young,
Gifted, and Black

P
rofessor Dyson, what’s the answer?”

Tim Russert, host of *Meet the Press*, asked me. “Ban video games, ban violent music lyrics?”

Russert was referring to the tragic school shootings in spring 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, which left thirteen students and a teacher dead. In the eyes of many critics, the shootings were largely instigated by the violent influence of video games, movies, the Internet, and popular music. I had encountered this argument before when I testified in the U.S. Senate about the impact of rap music on American youth. This Sunday morning, I appeared on *Meet the Press* with a panel of commentators that included Surgeon General David Satcher, Kansas Republican senator Sam Brownback, America Online CEO Steve Case, and author David Grossman, to try to unpack the meaning of the mayhem in Colorado.

“That might lead to a resolution of the crisis in Kosovo,” I retorted, trying to suggest the often overlooked relationship between war—in this case, NATO’s bombing of Serbia—and problems of violence closer to home. “We don’t know.”

I realized that my off-the-cuff retort might be perceived as a smart-ass stab at the sensational or the too-easy explanation, but it was a lesson that I had learned from Martin Luther King, Jr. One of King’s central reasons for opposing the Vietnam War was the moral hypocrisy of trying to convince ghetto youth that “Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems” without having “first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.” I felt certain that were King around and had he been pressed about the violence that saturates American society, he might have similarly pointed out the

relationship between international and domestic violence, especially since the first half-hour of *Meet the Press* had been devoted to the NATO bombings.

But I also suspect that King might have objected to how the violence that pervades poor communities is ignored—or when it is addressed, it is blamed on black or brown youth themselves—while violence that sweeps through suburban white communities is made the source of a national crisis and the cause for intense hand wringing, finger pointing, and soul searching.

“I think that the reality is that all of us as human beings are trying to make suffering make sense,” I offered. “Violence has enormously and precipitously risen in the last, say, thirty to forty years. I think what we have to do is look for other factors that are much more relevant to how we understand what’s going on in this world.”

After pointing out that video games were certainly not responsible for the brutal police killing of African immigrant Amadou Diallo in New York City, I argued that the “social pathology of racism in this country” should be taken into consideration, as well as the “gender oppression of women—most of the victims [of violence] happen to be women and children in our society.”

I argued that the steep rise in violent deaths of minority youth was stunning. “And in black communities—I think we have to pay attention to this—young black men are eight times more likely to die at the hands of firearms than are white kids.” While acknowledging the responsibility of “video-game makers, the music-makers, the filmmakers, and us as parents,” I said that “we have to pay attention” to the “hierarchy of privileges assigned to some kids and not to others.”

As I spied Russert gently raising his hand to interrupt me, I held the floor for one last flurry of words aimed at getting the hard truth on the table. Russert graciously relented.

“Littleton, Colorado, is not an exception in American society,” I stated. “But when crime affects the larger community, then it becomes a subject for roundtable debates. Think about Yummy Sandifer, the young black kid in Chicago who was killed by fellow gang members. He was eight years old and already had 23 arrests. By the time he was 11, he was shot for—his fellow gang members believed—for telling the police about what he was doing. We didn’t have a roundtable on Yummy Sandifer. You know what we said? We said it was black cultural pathology. We said the family structure of African-Americans was deteriorating.”

I knew I was pushing the envelope, but I resolved to break, even if temporarily, the sordid silence in this debate about the suffering of black and brown youth.

“If we were to be fair, we would apply this same analysis to white culture,” I provocatively proffered. “Can we find a white family pathology going on? I think not. What we have to say then is that the incentives for violence are extraordinary in this country. And what we have to do is stop scapegoating and stigmatizing, and figure out a way to make us corporately responsible for the enormous rates of violence. The troubled youth who committed murder in Littleton were obsessed with black kids. They were worshiping Nazi symbols and so on. Those are the real culprits, and the access to firearms. That is very important.”

I argued so passionately that morning because I have too often been involved in panels, conferences, and scholarly conversations where black youth were demonized for their social distress. To be sure, white youth are taken to task for their moral and social shortcomings. Still, they are not reprimanded with nearly as much anger, or the occasional hatred, that is directed at minority youth. How many times had I heard even black adults repeat in discussions about the hip-hop generation that if King were alive, he would be greatly troubled by them? They contend that King would be opposed to rap music and the violent imaginations of the youth who make and consume this dubious art. That may indeed be true, but it would not be all that King might have to say. He would at least attempt to understand the rage that burns in areas of hip-hop culture before he condemned its cultural expression. Surprisingly, King and prominent members of the hip-hop generation have a lot in common that is worth examining.

Although it may seem blasphemous to say so, there is a great deal of similarity between Martin Luther King, Jr., and a figure like Tupac Shakur. They both smoked and drank, worked hard, and with their insomnia waged a “war on sleep.” King and Shakur cursed, told lewd jokes, affectionately referred to at least some of their friends as “nigger,” had fierce rivals, grew up in public at the height of their fame, shared women with their friends, were sexually reckless, wanted to be number one in their fields, occasionally hung out with women of ill repute, as youth liked nice clothes and cars, were obsessed with their own deaths, made a living with words, lived under intense scrutiny, allegedly got physical with at least one woman, had their last work published posthumously, and died before reaching their full potential. As with many other

hip-hop artists, King shaped and revealed his persona through a name he was not born with. (His name was legally changed from Michael to Martin when he was five years old.) Like many hip-hop stars, King preferred the company of light-skinned black women and was accused of fathering a child out of wedlock. As a youth, King, like some hip-hop figures, twice attempted to commit suicide. And like some hip-hop artists, King during his last four years was often morose and even deeply depressed. Finally, King was, like hip-hop's greatest DJs and producers, a gifted sampler who recombined rhetorical fragments in an ingenious fashion.

That said, there are also huge differences between King and many hip-hop artists. The most obvious is King's rejection of violence as a philosophy of life or as a means to freedom. Neither do I mean to suggest that hip-hop artists are engaged in a profound mission to change the world nor to argue that they should receive the sort of tribute paid to King. (I can't help but think here of comedian Chris Rock's acidly humorous observation that while he "loved Tupac and Biggie," we shouldn't exaggerate their importance. Rock says that fans lament that "Biggie Smalls was *assassinated*. Tupac Shakur was *assassinated*. They weren't assassinated. *Martin Luther King* was assassinated. . . . Those brothers just got shot! . . . School is still going to be open on their birthdays.") Nor am I arguing that if one multiplies King's weaknesses and then adds loud music, one can get a clear picture of hip-hop culture at its best. What I am arguing is that the politically correct and puritan urges of especially the black bourgeoisie lead them to attack black youth for some of the same shortcomings that they deny King had. Or, in the interest of King's reputation, they simply overlook his faults. King's less savory habits, or even his revealing erotic preferences, may indeed yoke him to despised black youth who share these same traits. It is often ignored how many rappers entertain King's ambition to stamp out the evils of racism and class oppression. Often King is set off in bold relief from such youth. But his personal and political struggles suggest that he was closer to black youth than we might admit.

If we acknowledge that King was an extraordinary man despite his faults, perhaps we might acknowledge that some of our youth have the same potential for goodness that King possessed. (We must remember that if King had died at age twenty-five like Shakur, or at twenty-four like Notorious B.I.G.—or after his first fame as a boycott leader at twenty-six—he might now be remembered as a promising leader who was shown to have borrowed other people's words and wives, infractions that in the absence of his later and greater fame we might be less willing to

forgive.) In the process, some of these youth, by identifying with King, might rise above their limitations. They might also see that they can remake their lives and place their skills in the service of social transformation. Or we may realize that they do not have to be Martin Luther King, Jr., to be accepted or affirmed. At the very least, we must be willing to criticize and embrace them in the same spirit of understanding and forgiveness that we extend to King. King did as much when he confronted and mentored black youth who were gang members or ghetto residents.

King's brilliant uses of black orality link him to hip-hop culture. He drank from the roots of black sacred rhetoric within his own genealogical tree—he was the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist preachers—and from legendary figures who branched into his youthful world, including William Holmes Borders, Sandy Ray, and Gardner Taylor, who is widely viewed as King's preaching idol and the "poet laureate of the American pulpit." Before King was baptized in the waters of liberal white theological education, he drew deep from the well of wisdom contained in the words of his church elders. King also learned the art of masking hard truth in humor. He learned how to dress cultural observation in the colorful cadences of tuneful speech. King gleaned these lessons from the foremost artisans of the black folk pulpit, including renowned revivalist and civil rights activist C. L. Franklin. From these figures, King learned to weave penetrating and eloquent liberation stories by threading into his sermons extensive allusion to the Bible and keen political and social analysis.

Hip-hop's obsession with word-play, verbal skills, and rhetorical devices marks its best artists' performances. Hip-hop is deeply indebted to the secular elements of black music and oral culture. Its departure from religious rhetoric is glimpsed in its embrace of blues themes (the unfaithful lover, sexual prowess, the moral outlaw) and older oral forms such as toasts and "the dozens," playful verbal put-downs. Hip-hop culture's celebration of irreverent folk and popular identities—the thug, the pimp, the mack, the hustler, the player, and the like—too freely play on racial stereotypes for the liking of black church members. Hip-hop also fuses the rhythmic and percussive elements of the spoken word with the syncopations of African-American music and thus reveals the inherently musical qualities of black speech. As with black preaching, hip-hop's repertoire of styles is distinguished by idiosyncrasies, derivations, and transformations within the boundaries of a given genre. These similar features allow a preacher or hip-hop artist to establish a unique sound

while blending with, and stretching out, the art form. For example, C. L. Franklin's sermons are characterized by sonic hiccups, verbal gyrations, soul-shaking shrieks, and lightning-quick rhythmic shifts. By contrast, Caesar Clark's preaching thrives on guttural ellipses, densely layered melodies, multioctave moans, and a labored buildup of pace. Both are past masters of the chanted sermon, known colloquially as the "whoop." Similarly, Snoop Dogg's rap styles feature a feather-thin legato, deeply melodic flow, tender tenor tone, and Southern-drenched cadences. His approach rubs sharply against Ice Cube's stentorian baritone, staccato rhythms, sharply energetic delivery, and ominous tone. But each has been viewed as a gifted performer within the gangsta rap genre.

Hip-hop has come under severe criticism for its practice of "sampling"—borrowing older sounds or contemporary beats without attribution and without generating original music. Sampling, however, is more technologically sophisticated and intellectually creative than the mere sonic piracy suggested by its critics. For instance, when rap producer and mogul Puff Daddy lifts the Ashford and Simpson-penned Diana Ross anthem, "I'm Coming Out," he does not merely reproduce it note for note. Instead, he slows the beat and loosens the tightly coiled rhythmic release into the bridge, then builds an infectious hook by looping a break beat from the original song, giving rapper Notorious B.I.G. a complex aural landscape on which to shape his lyrical message. Because early hip-hop producers and DJs often were forced for lack of technology to sample less creatively than in the present—that is, they literally lifted or duplicated lines of rhythm and looped them as the song's primary beat—rap's musical foundations were accused of being parasitic on existing music or merely imitative. Moreover, older artists like James Brown, whose sampled beats provided early rap its rhythmic backbone, sought financial compensation for the unlicensed use of their music. While the charges of theft and imitation were being leveled at early hip-hop, few considered its winning features: Its brilliant reworking of musical identity. Its creative recoding of sounds. Its powerful fragmentation of vocal images. Its relentless drive to give rhythms and harmonies new aural contexts. Its flawless merging of voices from the past and present. Its edifying disruption of settled musical ideas. Its revival of long-forgotten melodies and discarded breaks to renewed popularity. Its miniaturization or exaggeration of sonic signatures. And its endless experimentation with and remaking of musical personae.

Of course, King has been assailed for rhetorical borrowing, for verbal sampling. Although the comparison is much too overworked to avoid

derision, he may be understood as a postmodern rhetorician. In this sense, King completely understood and accepted the conditions for generating oratorical originality. First, one must excavate sermons that have settled into the homiletical substrata. One must then dynamite and sift through the sermons' inessential features and clarify the potential to connect their themes to the goal of racial redemption. Then one must recast the sentiments such sermons express in the styles that make up the black sermon. To shift and mix metaphors, King cut and spliced others' voices, ideas, and images into his own reel of rhetoric to project a compelling picture of racial resistance. King expanded the ethical arc of white liberalism by sampling its root metaphors and its guiding visions. King reshaped liberalism's words and images within a fresh and exciting rhetorical context that fused white preaching and black religious traditions. He elevated and extended the rhetoric he borrowed; using it for even higher purposes and greater aims than suggested by its original intent.

Renowned preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick certainly did not intend to subvert the racial hierarchy with his homily, "On Being Fit." But once parts of his sermon found use in King's rhetorical universe, it gained a moral gravity it would have otherwise failed to achieve. King deconstructed white supremacy by reconfiguring the words of white authorities—ministers mostly, but theologians and philosophers too—within the bounds of his social and racial message. King's originality had nothing to do with saying words first and everything to do with how he said what he said. King's originality also had to do with how he backed up words with incomparable courage and actions and seamlessly stitched together disparate sources. Such a practice allowed him to say, more brilliantly and breathtakingly than he might otherwise have done, what needed to be said during the few years the world listened to him in person. King breathed into the formulations he borrowed the moral inspiration for black freedom and set the world on fire with his vocal magic. At the same time, he constantly remade his public persona. He found the appropriate rhetoric to forge his identity as the times and his purposes demanded, as his ideology shifted and evolved.

The bridge between King and contemporary rappers is built not only on the forms of hip-hop culture but on some of its themes as well. As was true of King, hip-hoppers are enraged by racist oppression and angered by the economic inequality that often makes black life miserable. King was concerned, as are many rappers, with the plight of black males. Such a concern is easy to understand given the masculine emphasis, even obsession,

of both the black freedom struggle and hip-hop culture. King argued, for instance, that the "ultimate way to diminish our problems" would be a 'government program to help the frustrated Negro male find his true masculinity by placing him on his own two economic feet.' But perhaps one of the most intriguing and undervalued areas of overlap between King and contemporary rappers is in their struggle with the problem of evil. In formal theological circles, the branch of thought that addresses this question is called theodicy. Theodicy attempts to understand and explain why bad things happen to good, or at least, innocent, people. It also tries to understand human suffering in the light of asserting that God is good. How can a good God allow evil to exist and to harm her children?

King's professor, L. Harold DeWolf, who greatly influenced King on this score, examined at least four solutions to the problem of evil and found them all wanting. The first solution holds that evil is a mere illusion in human beings' minds, an error in perception. Hence such evils are not real to God. In DeWolf's view, empirical evidence disproves that claim. Second, human suffering serves to warn us of the existence of even greater suffering and evil from which we are mercifully spared. DeWolf maintains that this argument is theologically wrong because it fails to address where the greater evil came from in the first place. Third, the sufferer deserves her suffering since a just God would mete out punishment only to the evil. DeWolf argues that this solution is contradicted by the fact that so many good people have suffered for no reason. The final solution holds that human suffering results from our failure to take proper advantage of the scientific resources that might prevent or alleviate our pain. DeWolf rejects this solution for two reasons: it depends on the benefits of scientific techniques that are not permanent, since we eventually die despite their application, and it fails to account for why the world was designed in a manner to keep millions ignorant of such techniques. DeWolf attempts to solve the problem by suggesting the careful synthesis of two more plausible solutions. First, the so-called finitistic view holds that God chooses to limit herself in power in order to give real power to her creatures, thus respecting their free will. The next argument, the so-called absolutist view, holds that God's transcendent power assigns purpose to human suffering that falls beyond human reason. In the end, DeWolf affirms the belief that unearned suffering can become redemptive because it can help bring about God's ultimate purpose.

King reflected his teacher's thinking on this score. In a brief 1960 essay in *Christian Century*, he underscored his faith in just such a resolu-

tion of the problem of evil and the place of unearned suffering in the struggle for freedom:

My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.

It is also clear from this passage that King strongly believed in making a virtue of necessity. Since suffering and evil are unavoidable, one must transform them into tools for good. His philosophical approach to suffering and evil was part of a crucial survival technique. Those who believe that suffering and evil have an ultimately good purpose can counteract the fear, anxiety, or resentment that eats away their moral resolve. Unearned suffering is ultimately redemptive because it is aligned with God's power to bring about good in the universe. King often reminded his followers that they had "cosmic companionship" in their struggle for freedom and justice. King believed that nonviolence, which often entailed suffering and brutality, was the best way for oppressed blacks to achieve their liberation. Resort to violence would inevitably lead to massive destruction of black life. King warned blacks that "if you use violence, he [your opponent] does have an answer. He has the state militia; he has police brutality." Thus nonviolence was philosophically sound and eminently practical to combat the vicious force of white hatred. It matched such violence with black moral power. King realized that evil is "stark, grim and colossally real," and that it "is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of a persistent, almost fanatical resistance." In his later years, King sought to change white America by forcing it to come to grips with his massive, disruptive campaigns of nonviolent sabotage. Although far more aggressive than before, he still held out the waning possibility but absolute necessity for nonviolent social change.

Hard-core rappers, including Notorious B.I.G., Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Bone, Thugs N Harmony, have all, in varying ways, grappled with the problem of evil. Interestingly, this salient dimension of

ard-core rap has been overlooked, perhaps because it is hidden in plain sight. In addressing evil and hard-core rap, it is helpful to remember that theodicy also has a social expression. One of sociology's towering thinkers, Max Weber, conceived theodicy as the effort of gifted individuals to give meaning to the suffering of the masses. Indeed, the appeal of King and Malcolm X rested largely on their abilities to make sense of the suffering that their followers endured. Of course, King's and Malcolm X's theodicies had vastly opposed orientations. King argued that the unearned suffering of blacks would redeem American society. Malcolm believed in mutual bloodshed: if blacks suffered, then whites ought to suffer as well. More recently, black leaders as diverse as Colin Powell and Louis Farrakhan have urged blacks to take more responsibility in dealing with the suffering in their communities. Hard-core rappers, by contrast, dismiss such remedies. They celebrate the outlaw as much as they denounce the institutions they view as the real culprits: the schools, churches, and justice system that exploit poor blacks. Paradoxically, the fact that rappers are struggling with suffering and evil proves that in fact they are connected to a moral tradition, one championed by King, that they have seemingly rejected. Moreover, the aggressive manner in which rappers deal with evil—putting forth images that suggest that they both resist and embrace evil—is disturbing because it encourages us to confront how we resist and embrace evil in our own lives.

The suffering masses that concern hard-core rappers are almost exclusively the black ghetto poor. According to many gangsta griots, the sources of this suffering are economic inequality, police brutality, and white racism. These forces lead to a host of self-destructive ills: black-on-black homicide, drug addiction, and the thug life that so many rappers celebrate and, in a few cases, embrace. For instance, on his "The Ghetto Won't Change," hard-core rapper Master P expresses the widely held belief among blacks that the carnage-inducing drug trade flourishes in the ghetto because of government complicity and white indifference. On "Point Tha Finga," Tupac Shakur gives voice to the rage many blacks feel when they realize that their hard-earned wages are subsidizing their own suffering at the hands of abusive police. For Shakur, the ethical line drawn between cops and criminals is even more blurred by the police's immoral behavior.

But blurring the lines that divide right from wrong is what seems to set these urban theodicians apart from their colleagues in traditional religious circles. Even Martin Luther, who shook the foundations of the

Catholic church, dropped his moral anchor as he launched his own theodicy in the form of a question: "Where might I find a gracious God?" As Luther understood, the purpose of a theodicy is, in Milton's words, to "justify the ways of God to men." This is especially true when a God whom believers claim to be good and all-powerful allows evil to occur. The problem with most thuggish theodicies is that their authors are as likely to flaunt as flail the vices they depict in music. Unlike traditional theodicians such as King, hard-core rappers maintain little moral distance from the evil they confront. Instead, they embody those evils with startling realism: guns, gangs, drugs, sexual transgression, and even murder are relentlessly valorized in the rhetoric of gangsta rappers. Although gangsta rappers are not the only popular cultural figures to do that, their words provoke a special outrage among cultural critics. For instance, although the 1996 film *Last Man Standing*, starring Bruce Willis, was filled with gratuitous violence, it was not denounced nearly as much as Snoop Doggy Dogg's equally violent 1993 album, *Doggystyle*. Neither did the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *True Lies*, which was swollen by crude ethnic stereotypes, come in for the bitter attack aimed at Tupac Shakur's "2Pacalypse Now." When it comes to guns, we still feel safer when they are in the hands of white men, even if they are thugs.

Moral ambiguity is at the heart of hard-core rap's struggle with evil. When it comes to dealing with that idea, hard-core rappers are treated far differently by critics than are the creators of gangster films. In *The Godfather*, for example, Francis Ford Coppola's characters pay lip-service to a code of respect, loyalty, and honor. Still, they are ruthless murderers. Coppola is considered a brilliant artist and his characters memorable creations. The hard-core rapper and his work are rarely credited with such moral complexity. Either his creations are taken literally and their artistic status denied, or he is viewed as being incapable of examining the moral landscape. It is frightening for many to concede hard-core rap's moral complexity. An equally frightening prospect may be that its moral ambiguity—in truth, it is more like moral schizophrenia—points up two disturbing truths. One, our theodicies might lead us to conclude that life, or our faith in God, is meaningless. Two, the big difference between saints and sinners is not achievement but effort. Theodicy is a cry from the heart of hurt. Some religious thinkers have argued that what hurts us most is our belief in God. Therefore, we should surrender our belief and stake our future on how humans treat each other. As Master P suggests on "The Ghetto Won't Change," life in the ghetto is occasionally absurd.

In the absence of life's meaning, many embrace one extreme of the thug's theodicy: hustling and heartless behavior are life's only rewards.

A remarkable feature of the thug's theodicy is the energy she expends to hold on to belief in God in the midst of suffering and evil. This is so even if one is torn between accepting or rejecting evil behavior. On his rap "Things Done Changed," The Notorious B.I.G. claimed that his rap career was a direct outgrowth of a moral choice: pursue hip-hop or be a hoodlum. Tupac Shakur, perhaps the theodacist laureate of gangsta rap, was obsessed with God in his albums. Although he often expressed the belief that there was "a heaven for a G," he could not free himself from the evil, pain, and suffering he saw around him, a conflict elegiacally expressed in "Only God Can Judge Me." On this song, Tupac's plea for divine guidance is cast in thugs' terms. Still, it touches a universal nerve. Even if they had vastly different answers, such a perspective binds Shakur and other hip-hoppers to King. Both participated, in different ways, in a powerful tradition of reflecting on suffering and evil.

The ultimate symbol of suffering and evil is death. By engaging the forces of social chaos in our nation's urban centers—from drug addiction to AIDS, from mugging to murder—many black youth have been inducted into a culture of death. Many hip-hop artists are obsessed with death, especially the violent death of black males at the hands of their own number. Hip-hoppers evoke a continuum of emotions to confront death—from anger to rage, from regret to surrender. They also don a variety of rhetorical masks in facing the loss of life: as perpetrator or victim, as mourning relative or friend, or often as consoling survivor. Hip-hoppers are romantic, realistic, reactionary, or retributive when they speak of death. Often they combine some or all of these moods. Hip-hop's rhetorical modes of response are an attempt to understand and resist the psychic and moral devastation of death. Ironically, such an attempt often leads hip-hoppers to an apparently deeper embrace of the ethic of destruction that breeds violence and death. The contempt that hip-hoppers feel for the forces that make their friends suffer is revealed in the lyrics of rap's Jeremiahs. The hip-hop jeremiad both rejects and embraces suffering. The urban prophet lodges a stirring complaint against the destruction of his friends even as he calls down destruction on the heads of his foes. The hip-hop jeremiad is, to a degree, a secular expression of the Hebrew Bible's *lex talionis*—the principle of an eye for an eye that characterized ancient justice. And hard-core hip-hop's resistance to and advocacy of violence compose a modern gangsta's midrash. Hip-hoppers seek to combat suffering and evil by interpreting their existence in the

light of the moral priorities of urban black life. In the inventive if torturous logic of hard-core rap, urban prophets seek to end carnage by pointing to how carnage ends life. At the same time, they seek to show cleverly the futile ends of carnage, its sick purposes. The moral message is often muddled, and the resistance and ratification of death are often confused. But too often the complicated narratives of hip-hop that address the culture of death are dismissed as merely glorifying or glamorizing violence. Glorification and glamorization of death in hip-hop certainly thrive as often flawed but important rhetorical strategies designed to bring visibility to the suffering of poor black and brown youth. Scholar Crispin Sartwell argues that such "lyrics do not glorify violence, unless you take the position that to notice violence linguistically, to admit that it exists, is to glorify it." Sartwell says that these lyrics "tell about violence, mourn it, object to it, and rage against the conditions that make violence a day-to-day reality."

To be sure, a great deal of death dealing, dying, and mourning occurs in hip-hop. Some of rap's most poignant narratives are elegies for fallen friends. Ice Cube's "Dead Homiez" is a path-breaking example of the genre, as Cube seeks an answer to why a funeral is "the only time black folk get to ride in a limo." Tupac Shakur's "Life Goes On" is a haunting, mellow paean to departed homeboys. And few can match the Notorious B.I.G. when it comes to knowing how death can at once create and destroy black identity. For B.I.G., death can bring a person fame even as it wipes out the personality on which the fame descends. His perspective is brutally summarized in the title of one of his last songs, "You're Nobody Til Somebody Kills You." The song was contained, in tragic sync with Notorious B.I.G.'s untimely death, on his posthumously released compact disk, *Life After Death*. In Scarface's "Never Seen a Man Cry," the rapper powerfully evokes the experience of simultaneously dying and watching death. And Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Murder Was the Case" is a powerful example of imagining one's own death. In the rap, Snoop is critically wounded by gunshot. His story tells the dread he feels in the face of his impending death. Unexpectedly his death is interrupted as God steps in to save him. For both Scarface and Snoop, the experience of death is narrated in its totalizing horror: it brings an end to life and the possibility of sharing joy or pain with loved ones. Or, for that matter, it saves one from knowing the wrath of one's enemies. Oddly enough, both death narratives reflect the pressure of sacred presence. God intervenes directly to stop Snoop's demise, and in Scarface's song, God is manifest as the peaceful spirit. In both cases, as in Tupac's narrative, hard-core theodicy is linked to an

unshakable sense of God's active intervention in human suffering. In Snoop's case, God is a spiritual mediator. In Tupac's lyrics, God is a moral adjudicator (especially in "Only God Can Judge Me"). And in Scarface's scenario, God is a divine healer in the world to come.

King was shadowed by the threat of death from the beginning of his public career. He was hounded, really, by a nearly palpable certainty of his own demise. But from his Montgomery days, King was convinced that even death might be used to assist providence. His viewpoint was characterized by a statement he made in 1960:

We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to the truth as we see it. I realize that this approach will mean suffering and sacrifice. It may mean going to jail. If such is the case the resister must be willing to fill the jail houses of the South. It may even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that a man must pay to free his children and his white brethren from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive. This is the type of soul force that I am convinced will triumph over the physical force of the oppressor.

From this passage it is clear that King linked his view of death to his vision of theodicy, since death might lead to the fulfillment of God's purpose. Five years later, King even more strongly reiterated his view of redemptive death while providing personal insight into death's meaning:

If I were constantly worried about death, I couldn't function. After a while, if your life is more or less constantly in peril, you come to a point where you accept the possibility philosophically. I must face the fact, as all others in positions of leadership must do, that America today is an extremely sick nation, and that something could well happen to me at any time. I feel, though, that my cause is so right, so moral, that if I should lose my life, in some way it would aid the cause.

During his Chicago campaign, King emphasized that he had "no martyr complex." He confessed that he was "tired of living every day under the threat of death," echoing a statement he had made years before to his

Montgomery congregation. While in public King remained philosophical about his death, he was left exhausted and often depressed by the inhuman crush of his schedule, the erosion of nonviolence as a viable strategy of social change, and the escalation of death threats. It is a measure of his remarkable will and a tribute to his ability to recover from self-doubt that King was able to function at all during his final four years. For instance, after a plane King had boarded received a bomb threat in 1964, he remarked to his wife and to aide Dorothy Cotton that "I've told you all that I don't expect to survive this revolution; this society's too sick." When Cotton tried to console him, King replied, "Well, I'm just being realistic." Increasingly, King felt more isolated, even alienated, from his close circle of associates. He began to eat and drink more as his depression grew heavier. Neither activity seemed to assuage his melancholy. King longed for "somebody you can sit with and discuss your inner weaknesses and confess your agonies and your inner shortcomings, and they don't exploit it, they listen to you and help you bear your burdens in the midst of the storms of life." This perhaps helps to explain King's extramarital affairs as well: he sought consolation in fleeting moments of affection in the embrace of a kind, warm soul. But little really worked; King became more depressed. Amazingly, he pushed on. The source of King's survival was his religious faith, which motivated him never to surrender hope. As King stated in a BBC interview, "I have my moments of frustration, my moments of doubt, and maybe temporary moments of despair, but I have never faced absolute despair because I think if you face absolute despair, you lose all hope, you have no power to move and act, because you really feel there is no possibility of winning."

Still, journalist and historian Roger Wilkins says that beginning in 1966, King had become a "profoundly weary and wounded spirit" and had been engulfed by "a profound sadness." His closest friend, Ralph Abernathy, confessed that in 1968 King "was just a different person"—"sad and depressed." A former staff member of Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) said that King "was depressed," that he "was dark, gaunt and tired," that he "felt that his time was up. . . . He said that he knew that they were going to get him." King friend Deenie Drew claimed that in his "last year or so, I had a feeling that Martin had a death wish. . . . I had a feeling that he didn't know which way to turn." John Gibson says that in his last years King could relax only in a room that had no windows, since he feared being vulnerable to an assassin's advances. He relentlessly searched people's eyes, ceaselessly wondering who would

kill him and how and when he would meet his death. In such an atmosphere pervaded by paranoia and fear, King's tragic death was surely at some level also a great relief. Unlike hard-core hip-hop, King saw suffering as a route to divine destiny, not its insuperable obstacle. Unlike many hard-core hip-hoppers, King believed that death might bring a more positive outcome. (At the end of his song "Only God Can Judge Me," Tupac and a guest lament that their only fear of death was the possibility they had to "return to this bitch.") He embraced its inevitability, at least initially, as a means to the greater good of black liberation. Hard-core hip-hop's use of death, alternatively, is rooted in a theodicy that often spurns black suffering and views death as a painful hindrance to personal and social freedom. A huge difference occurs, too, in the identities of their respective opponents. King's mortal enemies were white supremacists. Hip-hop's sworn enemies, both within its camp and beyond its bounds, are as likely to be black competitors and critics as white opponents. Nearly a decade ago, the Stop the Violence Movement released an antiviolent song where rapper Kool Moe Dee lamented running from a black criminal when he had never had to run from the KKK.

If their obsession with death at least partially unites King and hip-hoppers, they are also bound by their sexual mores and practices. The sexual transgressions of rappers, on record and in life, are well publicized and widely denounced. Hip-hop has been rebuked for its vulgar lyrics, explicit speech, crude and profane gestures, and publicizing of private sexual matters. At times its actions have brought cries of censorship. Many black critics in particular have called for rappers to return to an earlier epoch of moral discipline, when filthy sentiments were banned from public view and quarantined in juke joints, pool halls, blues clubs, or bedroom walls. Many black critics are especially ashamed of the raunchiness that is being passed off as authentic black culture. They claim that true representations of blackness have nothing to do with hip-hop culture's commercially driven images. According to critics, these images often do little more than repackage high-gloss stereotypes of black identity. Further, the misogyny and sexism that rip through hip-hop culture are viewed by many blacks as a radical departure from the norm in black communities. They think that black youth culture has embraced a leviathan morality that devalues black female identity. Moreover, the repulsive images of black males as studs and black females as "bitches" and "hos" contrast sharply with how blacks of previous generations viewed themselves. Such images also play to the racist beliefs about black identity and behavior that members of the civil rights generation bitterly

opposed. The irony of fighting for black youth to have a voice in civic and national life, only to have them use such freedoms to denigrate black women and to belittle and reject the cultural mores that sustained blacks from the plantation to the ghetto, is more than most black critics can abide.

Indeed, critics often point to the black freedom struggle as the basis of their criticism of hip-hop culture. These critics argue that if Martin Luther King, Jr., were alive, he would oppose the violence, misogyny, and vulgarity that for many youth marks "real" black identity. There is little doubt that they are right. In one of his "Advice for Living" columns that he penned for *Ebony Magazine* in the late fifties, King argued that rock music "often plunges men's minds into depravity and immoral depths." Unquestionably King was publicly opposed to moral decadence and cultural violence. He would have been much more sympathetic than current critics to the causes of what he might have thought of as youthful pathology. He would have certainly opposed hip-hop's crude misogyny and its public displays of shameless sexual lust. In fact, the use of the public sphere signifies a huge difference between black generations.

For older blacks, the public realm marked a sacred social boundary in which sexual interactions or passionate processes were kept private. Neither dysfunction nor delight—and sometimes the borders between the two were admittedly blurred—was to seep beyond the sanctified seal of domestic space. In the public square, private discourse was hushed. Private passion was muted. Harmful and exploitative stereotypes of black sexuality already soured black public interactions with white society. Therefore the less raw material that black folk provided to substantiate white claims, the better off the race would be. Even if one engaged in the very acts that to the white world proved black savagery—acts that many blacks knew defined *all* racial communities, including white ones, but which some blacks internalized as the mark of their own moral inferiority—they were to be hidden. On the surface this seems like hypocrisy, but it was a necessary hypocrisy, geared to survival in a highly charged racial atmosphere. It is a hypocrisy forced into existence by the greater hypocrisy of a white world that practiced criminal sexual acts against blacks without punishment or remorse. The best safeguards blacks could manage as they engaged the white world were the self-disciplining practices of sexual purity and repressed desire—qualities irrelevant to lustful whites. Blacks were always on sexual display, whether they liked it or not. They always operated under the harmful moral surveillance of white culture. Thus, blacks often lived their public lives at a remove from their private passions.

They knew that those passions, whether they involved sex or civil rights, had better be kept under lock and key. As King himself demonstrated, the private lives of blacks often found many uses. One of them was certainly to blow off steam and let down hair that had been pinned up for public purposes. Keeping his private life private was in many ways a moral and racial priority for King. Of course, the two priorities often inevitably merged.

Ironically, black youth feel nothing near the level of sanction or outrage faced by their forebears because of King's and civil rights struggles to remove racial double standards. Still, the reactions to rap's sexual ethics are remarkably strong. Indeed, it is undeniable that black youth face severe social sanctions of their own. They live under constant surveillance, whether in South Central Los Angeles or in malls in suburban Maryland. Poor black youth are subject to forms of public surveillance that are hugely different from middle-class blacks under apartheid thirty years ago. These youth are both worried over and resented by older blacks. The cruder forms of hip-hop culture evoke the resentment of the black bourgeoisie, a powerful sentiment fueled by several forces: the deterioration of relations between the generations, the expression of revulsion to black ghetto styles, and the expression of class conflict in black communities. Thus, there is a huge lag between civil rights and hip-hop styles and sensibilities in black culture (although there have always been class tensions in black communities, as witnessed, for example, in the deep resistance, even by black elites, to King's movement in Northern ghettos). In their own minds, hip-hoppers are "keepin' it real." This means they are telling the truth as best as they can about what they like and what they hate, even if it is relentlessly crude and all too often obnoxious. In seizing the microphone to speak their minds, black youth often forget, if they ever knew, how recent is the freedom to narrate publicly the pains and predicaments of poor black communities. But their black critics often fail to acknowledge that while hip-hop's rhetorical freedom may be put to troubling uses, its existence is a significant sign of the emancipation for which black elders fought.

Moreover, black youth should not be written off as simply pathological or morally corrupt unless we are willing to apply the same litmus test to King's life. True enough, King's attempt at discretion meant that he made a moral distinction between private and public behavior. But that distinction was as much a sign of the racial times in which he lived as it was an ethical prescription drawn from his religious beliefs. For that matter, his religious beliefs forbade the sort of behavior in which he, and

many, many more black leaders privately engaged. The bitter truth is that at a certain level, Snoop Doggy Dogg wants what Martin Luther King, Jr., enjoyed: sexual freedom. Because of King, Snoop can now choose to say so. King never had, nor would he probably have ever wanted, the chance to do the same. But their differing philosophies about public and private morality do not prevent us from exploring just how similar were King's and hip-hop's sentiments about sexuality and about women. If we can agree that King is not a deviant because of his behavior (a view I heartily endorse), then we must entertain the same possibility about black youth.

From his teens, King enjoyed sharp suits and light-skinned women. Nicknamed "Tweedie" because of his sartorial splendor, King learned about the love of women, or more likely, the tantalizing sexual treats of female surplus, in the black church—where women outnumber men three to one. King's erotic preferences and treatment of women were solidified at Morehouse. As his college friend Larry Williams recalled, "M.L. could get involved with girls, and most of the girls he got seriously involved with were light." Williams and King formed a bond around their boyhood flirtations. They named themselves "Robinson and Stevens, the wreckers" after an Atlanta wrecking crew. When asked the logic behind their names, King replied it was because "we wreck girls," bragging that we "wreck all the women." King continued his ways with women in seminary and graduate school. Outfitted with a wardrobe of fine suits and a new car, a rarity for graduate students, King played the field as he pursued his degrees. Even after he met his future bride, Coretta Scott, he satisfied his ample sexual appetite. King confessed to Coretta that he had cheated on her with an Atlanta girl over the 1952 Christmas break. They quarreled and then reconciled, and then announced their June 1953 wedding. But even after their marriage, King continued to stray. A family friend admitted that King "loved beautiful women," and that the "girls he 'dated' were just like models," that they "were tall stallions, all usually were very fair, never dark." The friend says that King was "really a Casanova" but with "a quiet dignity," since he "would give the girls respect." A woman who claimed to have known King "as a man" was described as "extremely fair . . . [with] freckles."

King preferred very light women. That preference had everything to do with light-skinned blacks' being extended more privileges than dark-skinned blacks because they were closer in hue to whites as the obvious product of miscegenation. Hence they were assigned a higher position on the racial totem pole. According to one friend, King "said that he was willing to fight and die for black people, but he was damned if he could

see anything pretty in a black [dark-skinned] woman." Such a self-hating sentiment is all the more stunning since its alleged source was a leader of the fight for black psychic freedom and dignity. King obviously had a great deal of distortion and miseducation to conquer in himself as he sought to bring psychic healing to blacks en masse. Tragically, too many hip-hop artists have enlarged King's narrative of disdain for black women. In their videos, they prefer light-skinned black women—or Asian or white women—to their darker-hued sisters. Having been for so long exoticized and demonized at the same time, dark-skinned black women still find themselves at the bitter heart of intense racial conflicts over self-worth, self-esteem, and true self-love—and that from black hip-hoppers who claim to "keep it real."

King's sexual pace did not slow even when he realized that J. Edgar Hoover was waging an ugly, evil campaign to destroy his reputation. One figure claims that King "had a chick in every town." Despite his promise, King at times appeared defiant in his affairs, donning sunglasses in the deluded belief that they would mask his famous face. At other times, he cavalierly introduced his flings as relatives. On the trip to Scandinavia to pick up King's Nobel Peace Prize, King and his party encountered an embarrassing situation. Several local women who had slept with some men in King's entourage afterward made off with several of their possessions and wallets. To quiet the potential fallout, King aide Bayard Rustin refused to press charges when the authorities arrived. But as one aide later explained, "All the guys were putting it to them [women in European countries] that, if the girls gave them pussy first, they'd see that she got to Martin." As Notorious B.I.G. rapped about his woman-sharing habits in a hotel with his friend Lil' Caesar:

Cease know
All his hoes go to my door
Then they go to his floor
To fuck some more.

And like hip-hoppers, King's sexual liaisons were even finding their way into his spoken work. King once made improper sex an analogy for segregation, saying that "segregation is the adultery of an illicit intercourse between justice and immorality," which "cannot be cured by the Vaseline of gradualism."

Not only were King's sexual relations remarkably like hip-hop culture's, but his views toward women were not much more enlightened. In fact, he was solidly chauvinistic. In another of his "Advice for Living" columns for *Ebony*, for instance, King responded to a woman's query about how to handle her husband's extramarital affair. He placed the responsibility for her husband's straying squarely on the wife's shoulders. King asked the wife to consider what faults she might possess to cause her husband to stray—"Do you nag?" he asked—and to reflect on the qualities that the other woman might possess that she was lacking. In an earlier column, King had expressed the belief that "the primary obligation of the woman is that of motherhood." As King's only high-ranking female staff member, Dorothy Cotton, put it, when it came to women's rights, King "would have had a lot to learn and a lot of growing to do." King was in constant conflict with his wife about her role. She wanted to become much more involved in the movement; he wanted her to stay home and raise their children. Further, King was "somewhat uncomfortable around assertive women." His own strained relationship with Ella Baker is exemplary. As Baker noted about SCLC:

There would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. And second . . . I knew that my penchant for speaking honestly . . . would not be well tolerated. The combination of the basic attitude of men, and especially ministers, as to what the role of women in their church setups is—that of taking orders, not providing leadership—and the . . . ego problems involved in having to feel that there is someone who . . . had more information about a lot of things than they possessed at that time. . . . This would never have lent itself to my being a leader in the movement there.

Andrew Young confirms King's difficulties with strong, independent women, claiming that they "had a hard time with domineering women in SCLC, because Martin's mother, quiet as she was, was really a strong, domineering force in the family." Young provides perhaps an unintended insight about the politics of female blame that often drive the patriarchal logic of black liberation movements when he adds, "She was never publicly saying anything but she ran Daddy King, and she ran the church and she ran Martin, and Martin's problem in the early days of the movement was directly related to his need to be free of that strong matriarchal influence. This is

a generality, but a system of oppression needs strong women and weak men." King's outlook on women was only barely better than many black youth have today.

King is indeed much closer to hip-hop cultural sentiments than we have up to this point admitted. As Dorothy Cotton suggests, King would have had to make huge adjustments in his outlook to address effectively contemporary social ills such as gender oppression. Still, there will be many critics who claim that in spite of his sexism, he otherwise treated women with dignity and respect. To a degree, that is the case. But King's private sexual dealings with women, and his public discomfort with female authority, suggest otherwise. Moreover, the allegation that King may have engaged in a shoving match or a fight with a woman the night before he was murdered underscores how arbitrary are our distinctions between King and hip-hoppers.

King's views of women certainly affected his wife, though she claims that she and King never discussed his indiscretions. Yet King's womanizing and his largely coerced neglect of domestic duty left its mark on his family. Of course, King's relationship with his wife was shaped by his chauvinistic beliefs about the role of women. King's painfully narrow view of gender roles also strained his relationship with powerful women in the civil rights movement. King routinely overlooked the achievements of the black women who pioneered the path of racial and sexual liberation. He neglected the brilliant insights and courageous actions of his female contemporaries who were amazingly effective in shaping strategies for social change. While King has transcended his own era as the surpassing symbol of social struggle in the twentieth century, he proved to be in his relationship to women very much a man of his times.