

Bogazianos

5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and



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5 Grams

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5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs

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For NYC

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Introduction

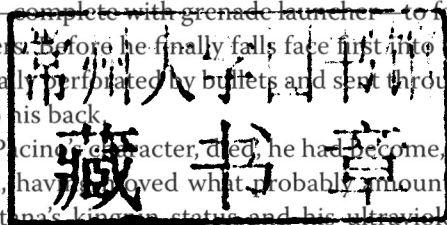
I will not get bagged on a rock.

—Ghostface Killah, “Run,” *The Pretty Toney Album*, 2004

In all of rap’s gangster mythology there is perhaps no more overused imagery than Brian De Palma’s 1983 movie, *Scarface*, especially its last scene. In it, Al Pacino, in a paranoid frenzy after snorting scoops of cocaine arranged like mountains on his desk, charges onto his balcony with a military issue M-16 rifle—complete with grenade launcher—to face a small army of rival drug dealers. Before he finally falls face first into the fountain below, his body is literally perforated by bullets and sent through the railing by a shotgun blast to his back.

By the time Tony Montana, Pacino’s character, died, he had become, by all accounts, a cocaine kingpin, having amassed what probably amounted to tons of cocaine. Tony Montana’s kingpin status and his ultraviolent death, therefore, have provided rap artists with a ready-made model of gangster heroism. And, indeed, the adoption of *Scarface* as an icon by self-consciously gangsta rappers is an easy connection to make. After all, how much more gangster can one get?

Even given the seeming obviousness of adopting Tony Montana as a hero, Ghostface Killah’s promise—which he makes in the same song from which the above epigraph was drawn—to “die with the heart of *Scarface*” in order to avoid getting arrested for the equivalent of one sugar packet worth of crack cocaine seems extreme. Tony Montana, that is, died for moving tons, not grams. Perhaps, then, Ghostface’s claims—along with those of countless other rap artists—are to be interpreted simply as the exaggerated boasts of an overactive imagination. Such exaggerations are all the more apparent because—as a major supplier of powder cocaine, the substance from which crack is ultimately derived—Tony Montana



never sold crack. Crack dealing, in opposition to the cocaine kingpin mythology of Scarface, has always been a low-level enterprise—a retail operation dependent upon the importation of its parent substance, powder. And here lies the primary problem that this book addresses: there is actually nothing “easy” or “merely” sensationalistic about the connection many rappers make between Scarface and crack cocaine. In fact, that connection was made for them long before they ever rapped about it. More precisely, this book examines a number of interlocking contradictions at the heart of the U.S. government’s punishment structure for crack that, together, comprise a highly elastic form of reasoning through which, in a strange turn, mere couriers of an inherently impure form of cocaine came to be treated *as if* they were the kingpins of global criminal organizations moving massive quantities of lethally pure drugs.

This book, thus, examines the profound *symbolic* consequences of crack’s paradoxical punishment structure, although it does so from “outside” of policy. Instead, I focus on the degree to which crack cocaine emerged as a primary symbolic referent through the development of an important reflexive lyrical stance that many rap artists in the 1990s took toward their own commercialization. In doing so, they became, in essence, products that “talked back” to their producers, as well as to a music industry system that has been consistently perceived as being duplicitous and humiliating. Out of rap’s confrontation with the industry that produced it, crack became *a lethal logic of work*: a grammar of social analysis in which exploited creative labor—as well as the possibilities of sustaining family and community life that such labor, it was hoped, might create—figures as central.

For me, the emotional force of these lyrical critiques came into full relief while I was performing with an independent, multiethnic New York City–based rap group that came of age during the early and mid-1990s. As part of an influential underground movement, we made music throughout the eastern United States, often recording with, opening for, or producing a number of well-known rap and jazz artists, including KRS-One, Jungle Brothers, De La Soul, Sadat X, O.C., Tha Alkaholiks, Special Ed, MF Grimm, Freestyle Fellowship, and Lester Bowie, among others. Because one of our founding members and main producers was a French-American who maintained strong connections overseas, we also recorded with a number of European artists—including Faf Larage and Shurik’N from France, and Main Concept from Germany—and performed regularly at jazz and hip hop festivals, as well as in smaller clubs and venues across the continent and in the United Kingdom.

That era in rap music saw the creation of some of the most influential albums in rap history as well as the violent deaths of some of the very artists who made such important work possible. We found out about the murder of the Notorious B.I.G., for example, before sunrise on March 9, 1997, when a choked-up road manager for Smoothie Da Hustler—whose concert we’d opened a few hours earlier—knocked on our hotel room door to tell us the news and share a drink in Big’s memory. For those of us deeply involved with making music during this period—as well as, I’m sure, for those deeply involved with listening to the music made then—things did seem to change profoundly. Historical reflections on this time—whether through documentaries, television specials, or exposé-style journalism—often emphasize one of two interpretations: first, that the period was, truly, quite violent, and the deaths of those involved were, in some ways, natural outgrowths of this violence; or, second, that the rap-related violence of this time (and since) was (and still is) primarily media driven, and that the period’s truest expressions occurred mainly in spontaneously generated “freestyle” gatherings in small-scale, “independent” clubs as well as on the streets throughout the city. While the first variation relies on a simplistic vision of young people from the streets somehow bringing their violence with them into the presumably nonviolent world of the music business, the second often assumes that competition and “battling” in rap are, simply, alternative, nonviolent means of expression.

Rap battles are never pure substitutions for violence, however; rather, they are dances—often literally—on and around the always precarious line between healthy competition and humiliation. A battle, in other words, is called such for a reason. Many of the most famous battle rappers who emerged from this period were quite explicitly out to ruin each other’s careers. Those who emphasize the spontaneous, free creativity of the period often forget the fights, near-fights, and ever-presence of serious violence—some of which spilled over from the streets, some from conflicts begun in New York City’s main jail, Riker’s Island—that pervaded the climate. This climate, though, was exacerbated by the “zero-tolerance” approach of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s administration to “quality-of-life crimes,” which—for all of the administration’s talk of community—often meant little more than systematically moving disreputable-looking people out of business-friendly zones in Manhattan. It is no mere coincidence that the lyrical reflexivity which developed during this period often railed against being trapped in humiliating conditions by faceless forces

of order and industry. In sum, the important creative output of this time was directly tied to the perceptions, experiences, and potential of violence and humiliation that were thoroughly woven into the fabric of daily life in the city as well as into the hopes and dreams of those young people trying to create nonhumiliating spaces of work through music.

During the many years I was involved with making music in this period, I was also involved with a young woman whose mother's addiction to serious drugs in the 1970s took a profound turn for the worse when crack cocaine emerged in the mid-1980s. The results, as anyone who has had similar experiences knows, were years of foster care for her young siblings, and long periods of her mother's total absence, which were then punctuated by chaotic visits to county jails and the mental health wards of city hospitals. As a number of researchers now suggest, the decline of crack markets—and, most importantly, the associated declines in lethal violence that began in the early-1990s—was seriously influenced by the cultural stigma that youth in communities most affected by crack cocaine attached to its users, derogatorily referring to them as “crackheads.” While acknowledging that such stigma was influential in reducing real rates of violence is of the utmost importance, for those of us whose daily lives were intimately and unavoidably involved with caring for the crackheads who also happened to be family members and friends, that stigma was very real and exceedingly painful. In fact, the widespread, nonchalant use of the word in the 1990s—especially by those whose lives seemed not to have been touched, in a visceral sense, by crack—often felt like a betrayal. Through deeper reflection, however, I have come to see that this was not a betrayal; rather, it was itself an indication of the degree to which crack cocaine had clearly affected everyone, and had become a primary symbolic referent for the many young people trying to distance themselves from the desperation, humiliation, and punitive surveillance that crack represented.

My personal experiences with rap and crack, therefore, inform every page of this book. Part of my goal in it, then, is to communicate some of the power and loss that, together, constitute what I call crack's experiential fabric—the spider-webbed interconnections between policy and culture that continue to affect lives to this day. Vital to the whole, hence, is my contention that the intensely personal experiences engendered by the crack era were—and still are—deeply intertwined with the paradoxical reasoning undergirding the federal crack law itself, which is outlined briefly below.

Rap, Law, and the Industry

On August 3, 2010, President Barack Obama signed a law repealing one of the most controversial policies in American criminal justice history: the 100-to-1 sentencing disparity between crack cocaine and powder whereby someone convicted of “simply” *possessing five grams of crack*—the equivalent of a few sugar packets—had been required by law to serve no less than five years in prison.¹ In order to receive the same five-year mandatory sentence someone would have to be convicted of *trafficking in five hundred grams of powder*. Enacted by the United States Congress in 1988 as an update to a 1986 statute,² the punishment structure had created, in the United States Sentencing Commission’s words, a fundamental “anomaly in the law” since no other drug in the federal system had carried a mandatory prison term for a first offense of simple possession.³

Hailed as a bipartisan victory, the law’s repeal depended upon a number of glaring inconsistencies that advocates for rational drug policy had been highlighting for over fifteen years. For example, crack—as researchers have consistently shown—is a drug that has long been in decline. And, while rates of violent crime in the United States have also declined since the early 1990s, federal crack cases *increased* during this period, and the gap between sentences for crack and powder *grew*, which severely problematized any justification of the law’s continued existence based on a link between crack and violence.⁴ Likewise, while the majority of people who report using crack at least once a year are white, over 80 percent of those sentenced under federal crack laws have been black.⁵

As outlined briefly in the book’s opening sections, I examine the cultural consequences of crack’s paradoxical punishment, and focus on a reflexive lyrical stance that emerged in 1990s New York rap, which critiqued the music industry for being corrupt, unjust, and criminal. A consciousness of exploitation was vocalized in the very products that were themselves being exploited. Many rappers began drawing parallels between the “rap game” and the “crack game,” juxtaposing their own exploits in street crime with the machinations of industry executives in the suites.

Where popular conceptions of the music industry often pit naïve artists against predatory executives, numerous rappers since the 1990s have come to present a vision of the music industry in which hustling, entrepreneurial artists from the streets *become* the industry executives in the suites. This situation creates a seemingly contradictory position for many

rappers as they are both behind the scenes as executives and in front of the camera as artists, colluding in the same industry exploitation of which they are so often critical, and doing so in the very products that are being produced, marketed, and consumed on a world stage and on a global scale.

This book, then, first began as a lyrical analysis of this internal critique in which the products themselves talk back to the very system that created them, and which artists of all genres have come to perceive as intolerable. Hence, many rap artists have come to indict *the work* of the industry, in which duplicity and complexity bind hard workers to an immoral system of production. The fundamental questions, thus, that first animated this book were these: What do these products themselves say about being products, the process of becoming products, and their relationship to their producers? And what role does crime play in this uneasy, ambivalent relationship to and alliance with the exploitative practices of the entertainment industries?

Very early on, however, it became apparent that it would be impossible to understand rap's engagement with its own commercialization without also analyzing the ways in which that conflict was being accounted for in the exploding cottage industry surrounding the murders of the two most important figures in rap's merger of street and suite crime: the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur. As the most prominent representatives of rival record labels based on opposite coasts, their feud took place in lyrics, in magazines, in awards shows, and in the streets. B.I.G. was himself a product of the 1990s New York rap milieu who later became the figurehead of Bad Boy records, the East Coast rival of Los Angeles-based Death Row Records, headed by Tupac. As the public icons of two powerful, black-owned record labels, B.I.G. and Tupac were instrumental in creating a public image of the rap industry as a business environment run like criminal cartels and street gangs. Since their murders, B.I.G. and Tupac have become near-mythical figures.

In addition to these considerations, it also became apparent during the early stages of this book that the degree to which the "real" criminal associations of rap artists have taken center stage was being institutionalized through the popularity of figures such as 50 Cent, who has been described as "B.I.G. and Tupac rolled into one."⁶ After being shot nine times, the crack dealer-turned-rapper was dropped from his record label contract because, he claimed, the label executives were too scared. After making a name for himself as a hungry underground artist, 50 secured

another record contract and went on to sell over eleven million copies of his debut album, *Get Rich or Die Trying*.

This book, therefore, took the shape it did because crack emerged as the “answer” to the seemingly simple question with which it began: What are the products themselves saying about being products, the process of becoming products, and their relationship to their producers? Crack, that is, figures as a broad, pervasive—even if contradictory—logic of work and labor that plays out in lyrics, documentaries, interviews, autobiographies, and, most significantly, the interaction between rap’s various expressive media and the paradoxical logic of the crack laws themselves.

In order to convey crack’s social complexity and symbolic power, I have borrowed a phrase from historian Raymond Williams to suggest that the American experience of crack cocaine represents the lethal core of a larger *criminological structure of feeling* that has risen to dominance in public life during the past thirty-plus years. A structure of feeling, Williams wrote, is “a particular quality of social experience and relationship”⁷ that reflects “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt,”⁸ which gives the “sense of a generation or of a period.”⁹ I call the crack era, the period in question, the *lethal core* of this structure for one primary reason: during this time, between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the national homicide rate rose from 8 to 10 per 100,000, and, in those neighborhoods hit hardest, to as high as *129 per 100,000*, reflecting a national death toll of nearly 25,000 people per year.¹⁰ As the lethal core of this larger structure, crack has continued to affect perceptions of social life even as violent crime rates have steadily declined since their peak in the 1990s. In my premise, crack represents a “vital area of social experience”¹¹ that is rife with conflicting impulses, but still functions as an ordering gridwork “with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension”¹² that often operates quite aside from what people consciously intend.

I call this structure “criminological” because it reflects the emergence of criminology, broadly conceived. As the systematic study of crime and criminal behavior, the discipline of criminology was *a theoretical intervention* into the abstract ideals of Enlightenment legal theory, problematizing, at the very least, its conception—perhaps best exemplified in the criminological canon by the writings of Cesare Beccaria—of human beings as free, rational, sovereign individuals. Criminology, however, was also *a practical intervention* into the administration of justice in nineteenth-century America, incorporating scientific and quasi-medical prac-

tices into the professionalizing forces that grew along with rapid urbanization. The actual practice of criminal justice in the United States today, therefore, is a composite of many elements: (a) early American Christian ideals of confession and repentance; (b) Enlightenment values of due process; (c) social-scientific explanations of law making, law breaking, and law enforcement; (d) the various bureaucratic practices that inevitably accompany the rise of any complex social institution; as well as (e) the popular support—sometimes tacit, at other times explicit—for the growth of state-sanctioned crime-control strategies. All of these elements only congeal into a larger criminological structure of feeling, though, in the wake of *deindustrialization*—the massive flight of manufacturing jobs from the urban core of many U.S. cities since the 1970s, and the concomitant rise of a service economy bolstered primarily by unskilled, low-wage labor.

In my conception, then, America's criminological structure of feeling reflects a collective impulse—even when, as is often the case, such impulses are driven by economic forces, and manipulated by politicians desperate for reelection in a world of increasingly unstable work patterns—to *punish away* the significant moral and material changes experienced in the latter half of the twentieth century. The results of this impulse—what sociologist David Garland has called “retaliatory legislation”—have been severe.¹³ At bottom, crime and punishment in twenty-first-century America—and, increasingly, the world—have come to provide whole sets of interpretive schema through which social life is now perceived, thereby creating overlapping webs of values, meanings, and beliefs that radiate far beyond official policies and documents, and thread their way into people's daily lives and cultural creations.¹⁴ Undergirding my premise is one simple, oft-repeated observation: the United States imprisons far more people for far more time for far more nonviolent offenses than anywhere else in the world. As a result, the third element of America's criminal exceptionalism—in addition to its high rates of lethal violence and its use of the death penalty—is this: the population behind bars has more than quintupled in the past thirty years, from less than half a million prisoners in the early 1970s to over two million presently, representing one in every one hundred U.S. adults.¹⁵ With an additional five million on probation and parole, the more than seven million people now under criminal justice supervision represent a full one in every thirty-one U.S. adults, with some states, such as Georgia, reaching as high as one in thirteen.¹⁶

The multiple, overlapping experiences, then, of crime and punishment in the United States have come to suffuse the daily lives of ever-increasing numbers of Americans, saturating their senses and perceptions, and affecting the ways in which they interpret the world. These experiences now include a whole range of related elements: (a) all known and unknown offenses and victimizations;¹⁷ (b) police stops, searches, seizures, and arrests;¹⁸ (c) bookings, arraignments, pleas, and, more rarely, trials;¹⁹ (d) *time*, in jails, prisons, and the various forms of supervised release that, by turns, have grown and fallen in professional favor;²⁰ and (e) the endless representations of crime and punishment that inundate public and private life through ever-changing media delivery systems.

A criminological structure of feeling, in other words, is a social condition in which criminal justice has become a stand-in for social justice generally. It is a condition in which the public has grown increasingly confident and vocal about its own criminological expertise, relying primarily on “commonsense” beliefs about why criminals do what they do, what law enforcement officials should do about them, and how long they should be locked up for, regardless of what other “experts”—professional criminologists, mainstream and critical—have to say about it all.²¹ More importantly, the specific policies that are generated from this condition all too often reflect contradictory logics that violently overlap and stand at cross-purposes. Take gang enhancement laws, for example, which can increase sentences for felonies by anywhere from two to ten years, depending on the seriousness of the underlying charge. Such laws—which often have neighborhood-level support, but are usually associated with right-of-center, tough-on-crime advocates—are intended, in the words California’s Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, to “seek the eradication of criminal activity by street gangs.”²² Take, also, hate crime statutes, which similarly reflect an effort on the part of left-of-center advocates to send a “clear message” that hate-motivated violence simply won’t be tolerated any more. Like gang enhancements, hate crime statutes also increase sentences by multiple years, depending on the seriousness of the underlying charge. The inconsistency of both efforts, however, lies in one bald fact: inmates in jails and prisons are all but required to “click up” with a *race-based gang* in order to secure even the most basic elements of survival, whether toilet paper or phone time. Prison operates according to the most reductive understandings of race, which guide almost every activity in it. Put differently, in order to show that we will no longer tolerate gangs or racism, we will, strangely, send,