BIGGIE ENVY AND THE GANGSTA SUBLIME

by Michael S. Collins

"[Violence] is as American as cherry pie."

—H. Rap Brown

"Damn—niggas want to stick me for my paper!"

—Biggie Smalls

"In other words, there is no real other than that which has been represented through imagery."

—Todd Boyd

1. Introduction

The beautiful murder, the murder lifted into the mind by "winged words," is in many ways the heartbeat of American culture—indeed, of all western culture. In the Iliad, for instance, Achilles kills Priam's son Lykaon after delivering a memorable speech on the nature of mortality to the pleading prince. Centuries later, lynchings of African Americans were enabled by disquisitions on the dangers they posed to white power and white honor, whose greatest symbol was the white woman. Eloquent Cold War speeches helped justify CIA rubouts and Western sponsorship of greedy and sometimes homicidal non-Western dictators (including Saddam Hussein). The movie Patton, based on the life of the American general, brings to the screen the eloquence that fills the hearts of soldiers as they march into battle. In the famous opening scene, Patton advises his men not to die for their country but to "make the other poor son of a bitch die for his country."

Hardcore rappers rhyming about blowing away their foes with 9-millimeter pistols are in a sense part of a grand and troubling tradition. A memorable example was the late Christopher Wallace when he put on the persona of The Notorious B.I.G. (aka Biggie Smalls, aka Big Poppa). Like other so-called gangsta rappers, Wallace seemed to follow the advice of the grandfather in Invisible Man, to "agree [the white power structure] to death and destruction." Rapping such lines as "I been robbing motherfuckers since the slave ships," Wallace let himself be swallowed up on disc in a persona his sharp ironies cut open—a persona perfected for black males of his approximate class and generation in New York City at the beginning of the 1990s.
Recall that, in the wake of the giant headlines and public outcry that followed the 1989 rape and near-fatal beating of the Caucasian woman who became known as “the Central Park jogger,” five African American and Hispanic teenagers were convicted of the crime after four confessed under pressure. Yet the convictions were vacated in 2002 after the real rapist gave a confession that was supported by DNA evidence. The original convictions and blanket media coverage nevertheless provided invaluable reinforcement for the late twentieth-century stereotype of “young black males” as incarnations of violence. In a sort of gesture some have compared to minstrelsy, Biggie pulled the stereotype on like a mask. “My forte causes Caucasians to say, ‘he sounds demented... I bite my tongue for no one,” he observes on one recording. On the contrary, Wallace liked to push the envelope of gangsta rap themes, and of the “bad nigger” persona his voice projected.

On the incendiary 1995 rap “Who Shot Ya,” for instance, Biggie revels in the ruthless omnipotence both of his persona and of his own M.C. skills:

Who shot ya?—
Separate the weak from the obsolete.
Hard to creep them Brooklyn streets.
....
I can hear sweat trickling down your cheek
Your heartbeat sound like Sasquatch feet
Thundering, shaking the concrete
The shit stop when I foil the plot
....
Slaughter, electrical tape around your daughter
Old school new school need to learn though
I burn baby burn like Disco Inferno
Burn slow like blunts with yayo
Peel more skins than Idaho potato.
Niggaz know, the lyrical molesting is taking place
Fucking with B.I.G. it ain’t safe.
......
Big Poppa smash fools, bash fools
Niggas mad because I know Cash Rules
Everything Around Me. . . .
......
And I’m Crooklyn’s finest:
You rewind this, Bad Boy’s behind this.

The phrases “lyrical molesting” and “rewind this” show Biggie’s awareness that the true source of his power is his ability to snap a couplet shut like a purse full of money rather than his ability to fire a Glock 9-millimeter pistol. Indeed, what rappers call “flow,” the ability to drive the river of language over swaggering beds of beats, is, when one considers that hip hop beats have a regulating function like stop and go signs and conventions in larger society, indicative of something even more critical to Western culture than the iconography of war. For it is from “flow”—whether the rapper’s, the writer’s, or the
demagogue’s—that all representation and all justification comes. Add to this the fact that Biggie was a mouth of an oral culture, with a syllable-looping voice as rich and supple as Eric Dolphy’s bass clarinet, and one has most of the explanation for his ability to get inside a listener’s head faster than the crack he boasted of having sold before his music took off. Indeed, he preens on one track about “smoking mikes like crack pipes” and adding “a little funk to the brain.”

The crucial element of his persona—the intensity and violence of his subject matter—came, as Biggie himself asserted, from the intensity and violence of the environment that molded his imagination. The source of his dramatic vocabulary, however, was the gangster rap and gangster movies that gave him a literary lineage that includes the N.W.A. and Death Row crews, the Mario van Peebles who made New Jack City, the Brian DePalma who made Scarface, the Martin Scorsese of Casino, the Francis Ford Coppola of The Godfather series, and, perhaps above all, the Bible, which includes not only the parables that Biggie’s best raps are, but the eye-for-an-eye epics and jeremiads of which the whole gangster ethic (and aesthetic) is a kind of distorted mirror image.

2. Representing Power

As parables, Biggie’s tales advertise practicality and power. Like other hardcore griots, he presents his rhyming skills, which might otherwise feminize him in a hyper-masculine environment, as indicators of his talents as a lover, a protector of his “niggas,” and a destroyer of his and their enemies. In rhyme after rhyme, he chronicles the risks of the “everyday struggle” on rough Brooklyn streets that around the nation have their equivalents in neighborhoods from which opportunities have been vacuumed by structural changes in the economy and in ideological attitudes toward poverty. Biggie’s raps position him as one who has become the ultimate master of those everyday risks, in part by having been injured by them all and having therefore fathomed them all. The fear he inspires in the above excerpt from “Who Shot Ya,” for instance—making the opponent’s heart beat “like Sasquatch feet”—testifies to his control over the fires others are burned by.

Spinning graphic, sometimes sadistic, tall tales, Biggie both radiates and feeds the street credibility that is, in effect, the endowment on which his lyrics live. Critical to this feedback loop of credibility is his placing himself in a tradition of rappers whose words can change to bullets and back again. He holds forth as someone who all but wrote the book on “playa” life—someone who knows the underground economy where America’s invisible people move so well that he can hold forth on its secrets. In “The Ten Crack Commandments,” for instance, Biggie comes down from the mountain of his rap glory to deliver the key rules and parables of “the game,” thus:

One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine!
It’s the ten crack commandments! . . Niggas can’t tell me nothing bout this coke, can’t tell me nothing about this crack, this weed. To my hustling niggas, niggas on the corner, I ain’t forget you niggas—my triple beam niggas:
I been in this game for years, it made me a animal
It’s rules to this shit, I wrote me a manual
A step-by-step booklet for you to get your game on track
Not your wig pushed back;
Rule number uno: never let no one know
How much dough you hold, cause you know
The cheddar money breed jealousy, ’specially
If that man fucked up, get your ass stuck up.

Rule number one touches on one of rap music’s greatest contributions to the analysis of American society: the elaboration of the mechanics of envy and jealousy. Previous pop music and various traditions of poetry have done much to illuminate the deep and surface currents of love. But hip hop has built its epics in the very vortex of the struggle for existence and success: a place where envy is more ubiquitous and perhaps more powerful than love, inasmuch as envy is a register of relative poverty in a culture where the desire to escape actual or perceived economic disenfranchisement can be all-consuming. What is more, the fact that envy can fuel everything from high school to corporate to academic pecking orders means that hip hop, in its intense focus on this emotion (and its mirror image, the refusal of honor involved in “disrespecting” someone), casts into relief a relatively little-discussed element of modern society.

The desire to be envied—and thereby honored—and the simultaneous fear of the possible consequences of being envied accounts for a great deal of the tensions in Biggie’s rhymed dramas—and in his life. Indeed, a key motivation of Christopher Wallace’s rap career and the small-time drug vending that preceded it, was his desire for the accoutrements of conspicuous success. He told Interview magazine that one of the enjoyable aspects of the drug selling lifestyle was “Going shopping all the time, just being in the neighborhood and getting money and knowing that in other neighborhoods there’s other niggas getting money. It’s like a little competition. We was young, so we was just goin’ to get jewelry and clothes and stay the flyest. And the girls—there was the whole competition about the girls and who had the prettiest girlfriend. Then there was goin’ to school, flyin’ it with other fly niggas in school. . . .” (Interview, June, 1997).

In the lyrics to “Sky’s the Limit,” Biggie dramatizes this reality:

A nigga never been as broke as me—I like that
When I was young I had two pair of Lees—besides that
The pin stripes and the gray—
The one I wore on Mondays and Wednesdays
While niggas flirt, I’m sewing tigers on my shirt—and alligators
You want to see the inside? See you later.
Here come the drama: “Oh, that’s the nigga with the fake—”: pow!
“Why you punch me in my face?”—“Stay in your place;
play your position.” Here come my intuition:
Go in that nigga’s pocket, rob him while his friends watching.
And hoes clocking. Here comes respect:
His crew’s your crew, or they might be next.
Look at their man’s eye. Big man they never try.
So—roll with ‘em; stole with ‘em.
I mean loyalty, niggas bought me milks at lunch
The milks was chocolate; the cookies, buttercrunch;

Here keeping up with the Joneses (or rather, the tigers and alligators) is critical to
avoiding disrespect, critical to getting “props” [respectful acknowledgement] and there-
fore crucial to self-esteem. If one lacks the fashionable possessions of the Joneses, one can
substitute physical power, the power to intimidate. Robbing the youngster who insults
him in front of the former’s friends instantly buys Biggie a certain amount of fear— a
reputation as someone who is not to be taken lightly, and whose good side it is wise to be
on. “Here comes respect,” indeed—and here comes leadership of the defeated taunter’s
crew, complete with offerings (milk, cookies, and gear) and loyalty.

In his Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City, Elijah An-
derson explains, in sociological terms, the sort of transaction Biggie dramatizes. “By the
time they are teenagers,” Anderson explains,

most young people [in the Philadelphia neighborhoods he stud-
ied] have internalized the code of the street, or at least learned to
comport themselves in accordance with its rules. [...] [T]he code
revolves around the presentation of self. Its basic requirement is the
display of a certain predisposition to violence, and possibly mayhem,
[showing that] when the situation requires it, that one can take care
of oneself. [...] Even so, there are no guarantees against challenges,
because there are always people around looking for a fight in order
to increase their share of respect—or “juice,” as it is sometimes called
on the street. (72–73)

As for the critical role played by tigers and alligators, Anderson explains that “In ac-
quiring valued things [...] an individual shores up his or her identity—but since it is an
identity based on having something, it is highly precarious.” That Biggie’s rhymed ma-
neuver is essentially capitalistic, and therefore in line with the real Christopher Wallace’s
drug selling and subsequent hit making is made clear by Anderson’s observation that “In
the inner-city environment respect on the street may be viewed as a form of social capital
that is very valuable, especially when various other forms of capital have been denied or are
unavailable” (67)—or insufficiently valued, as in the case of the high scholastic achievement
of which Christopher Wallace, while he attended school, showed himself to be capable.

“The Ten Crack Commandments,” then, is in a sense a Biggie Wealth of Nations, since it
purports to teach street corner hustlers the secrets of acquiring both social capital and real
cash. The fact that such a track adds to Biggie’s own street credibility (and therefore his
social and rap capital) makes it that much more potent as a sort of jeremiad in reverse—a
call not to moral reform but to mastery of "the game" that for the Biggie persona was the difference between life and death. Given its importance, the game is in fact often indistinguishable from life itself: It is the "game," more than crack dealing, that Biggie is describing as he lays down his crack commandments:

Number two: never let 'em know your next move:
Don't you know bad boys move in silence and violence?
Take it from your highness—I done squeezed mad clips
At these cats for their bricks and chicks.7

Number three: never trust nobody:
Your moms'll set that ass up, properly gassed up,
Hoodie to mask up.8 Shit—for that fast buck,
She'll be laying in the bushes to light that ass up.

The "game," in its interrelated rap, crack, and "playa" forms, is Biggie's great subject, though even here it is clear that he hoped, without quite being able to believe, that he could use it as a means to a less friendless end—an end that in his raps always remains elusive because the game tends to seep into and structure all relations and all perceptions. Though the image of the mother lying in the bushes to make a hit on the son is hyperbole in the less sharply defined world outside of rhymes, still, inside the game and the rap about it, the logic of the mama-assassin is as tight as the slant rhyme of "fast buck" and "ass up".

3. Crack

Recall that crack is the root of much of the devastation, desperation, and zero-sum calculations chronicled by bards like Biggie. Smoked crack moves from the pipe to the large surface area of the lungs and thence to the brain where, within ten seconds, it induces a high that has been compared to a full-body orgasm—even as, after repeated use, it can begin to affect brain chemistry, switching off or dampening prosocial instincts, including maternal ones, "during periods when its users are binging."9 In the crack houses of the 1980s, Terry Williams reports,

the sharing rituals associated with snorting [powder cocaine] are being supplanted by more individualistic, detached arrangements where people come together for erotic stimulation, sexual activity, and cocaine smoking. They may be total strangers, seeking only brief and superficial physical contact, encounters designed to heighten sensations; the smoking act is a narcissistic fix—there is little thought for the other person. The emotional content is largely due to the momentary excitation of the setting and the cocaine. Much of the sexual behavior is performed to acquire more cocaine. (107)

As for the sellers, among whom crack use is frowned upon because of the difficulty of doing business while in a cycle of craving and smoking, money is ultimately the drug of
choice. In other words, the dealers are, in principle, much closer to the American mainstream than are those they sell to. In his thorough but rather condescending study of St. Louis drug culture in the 1990s, Bruce Jacobs writes that in rock (or crack) form, cocaine can be sold on the streets for five times its wholesale price. [. . .] Crack rapidly expanded the opportunity structure for street-level drug selling. Entrepreneurs facilitated access to supplies, offered controlled selling territories, and created entry-level roles in drug selling that required only minimal training and start-up capital. [. . .] It was a mass-marketing craze that ‘would have made McDonald’s proud.’ [. . .] Intense competition and turf wars soon defined the scene as the urban drug landscape experienced rapid deregulation and destabilization. Epidemic levels of homicides and assaults resulted, not surprising given the drug’s pharmacology, fights over territorial boundaries, and sellers bent on propagating a fearsome ‘don’t mess with me’ reputation. (5)

Elijah Anderson confirms that crack “leaves in its wake great numbers of casualties. [. . .] Crack leads to illness, death, the proliferation of homeless children, crack babies, teenage pregnancy, violence, high rates of incarceration, and other social problems” (235). Anderson points out that a combination of deindustrialization, lack of contacts in alternative professions such as the building trades, and insufficient education help to funnel “severely alienated and desperate young blacks, at least those who are enterprising [. . .] [into] the drug trade. [. . .] In the inner-city community, drug dealing thus becomes recognized as work, though it is an occupation that overwhelming numbers of residents surely despise” (120–121). Crack exacerbated a situation whose modern roots go back to the 1920s, when severe housing discrimination became institutionalized and began the creation of what is now called “the inner city.” According to Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, 1920s housing discrimination was perfected in the 1930s by the U.S. government’s Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC):

This discriminatory practice grew out of a ratings system HOLC developed to evaluate the risks associated with loans made to specific urban neighborhoods. [. . .] Black areas were invariably rated as fourth grade [credit risks] and ‘redlined’ [to indicate that inhabitants of such areas were poor credit risks]. [. . .] [A] confidential 1941 HOLC survey of real estate prospects in the St. Louis area [. . .] repeatedly mentions ‘the rapidly increasing Negro population’ and consequent ‘problem in maintenance of real estate values.’ [. . .] Through this discriminatory ratings system, HOLC mortgage funds were invariably channeled away from black areas and were usually redirected from neighborhoods that looked as though they might contain blacks in the future. (52)

HOLC practices were the models for the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration that “together completely reshaped the residential housing market of the United States” (Massey and Denton 53).
HOLC, in short, helped institutionalize the indiscriminate dis-crediting of a whole population living in red-lined areas. In many cases, those born within the red lines continue to be cut off from the bank credit on which America’s suburbs and much of its twentieth-century middle class was built. This economic disenfranchisement, of course, cast a psychological shadow: the sense, on the one hand, of being discredited not only in the arena of bank loans but across a wide spectrum of one’s interactions with American society, and, on the other hand, the determination to win accreditation—to turn stigma into status regardless, are both important elements in “inner city” culture and in hip hop.

Cornel West, in his 1991 crack-era essay “Nihilism in Black America,” lamented the “monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America” (19). West, however, points his finger not at crack itself but at the conditions that allowed it to become both a primary source of economic opportunity and a means of escape from the “nihilism” brought on by, among other things, a chronic lack of such opportunities and a constant mass-media-induced consciousness of the goodies and the attendant “props” other people have. Defining nihilism for the purposes of the essay as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness,” West traces the phenomenon back to white supremacy that has hung like a poison in the air for African Americans since the institutionalization of slavery and its attendant rhetoric. Zooming up to modern times, he points to the hegemony of market calculations and cost-benefit analyses whose “common denominator [. . .] is usually the provision, expansion, and intensification of pleasure”—a common denominator that ends up reducing individuals to “objects of pleasure” and edging out “nonmarket values—love, care, service to others[,] that were] handed down by preceding generations [of African Americans]” (26–27).

The mom lying in the bushes to “light that ass up” can serve as a poster image for West’s insight. But the paradox, evident in Biggie’s rhymes, is that the invisible hand of the market, whose fingertips took the form of pale crack rocks in many poor city neighborhoods in the 1980s, was and is a source of hope that promises—and often delivers—an end to “meaninglessness, hopelessness and (most important) lovelessness”. “The Ten Crack Commandments,” as a game plan for winning in the world Williams and Jacobs describe, actually offers a sort of amoral hope with its warnings against the bugaboos of all capitalism: inefficiency, inattention, and unreliability, and attendant bad credit and poor risk management:

Number four: I know you heard this before:
Never get high on your own supply.
Number five: Never sell no crack where you rest at.
I don’t care if they want an ounce, tell ‘em bounce.
Number six: that goddammed credit, dead it.
If you think a crackhead paying you back, shit forget it.
Seven: this rule is so underrated:
Keep your family and business completely separated.
Money and blood don’t mix like two dicks and no bitch,
Find yourself in serious shit.
CALLALOO

Number eight: never keep no weight on you
Those cats that squeeze your guns can hold jumps too.
Number nine should a been number one to me:
If you ain't getting bags stay the fuck from police.
If niggas think you snitching they ain't trying to listen.
They'll be sitting in your kitchen waiting to start hitting.
Number ten: a strong word called consignment,
....
If you ain’t got the clientele say hell no.
Cause they going want they money rain sleet hail snow.

Delaying for the moment discussion of the intense sexism and lack of compassion for crack addicts with which these lines are laced,\textsuperscript{10} the tightness of the lines’ game plan, abbreviated and generalized though it is, shows why it is no accident that a number of those who have survived the crack culture and invested their energies in legal businesses (Jay-Z may be the most prominent surviving example) have turned out to be tremendously skilled capitalists. Number four, getting high on your own supply, for instance (a specialized form of embezzling that some Enron executives raised to the level of high art) makes it difficult or impossible to follow the other nine commandments.

4. Lil’ Kim

As for commandment number five, it is a corollary of the commandment to keep one’s family and illegal business separated, and it is also good risk management, since a regular procession of clients to one’s place of residence increases the likelihood of being tracked down by police or robbed by desperate users or rival entrepreneurs. In addition, the logic of keeping one’s family out of an illegal and extremely dangerous—sometimes literally cutthroat—business seems self-evident. Biggie’s metaphor, however, is a classic example of a thread in his lyrics and narrative interludes that draws the ire of feminists. In \textit{When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down}, Joan Morgan writes of “the stinging impact of the new invectives and brutal imagery” [her italics] in lyrics like Biggie’s. She tells her readers, “My decision to expose myself to the sexism of Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, or the Notorious B.I.G. is really my plea to my brothers to tell me who they are. I need to know why they are so angry at me.” Her conclusion is not far from Cornel West’s: that hard core rap is bubbling with hopelessness and lovelessness: “It’s extremely telling that men who can only see us as ‘bitches’ and ‘hos’ refer to themselves as ‘niggas.’ [. . .] For too many black men there is no trust, no community, no family. Just self” (Morgan 68, 74–75).

On the other hand, Morgan writes, “Denying the justifiable anger of rappers—men who couldn’t get the time of day from [the conquests they rhyme about] before a few dollars and a record deal—isn’t empowering or strategic” for black feminists (77). Articulating her own game plan, she argues, “hip-hop can help us win. Let’s start by recognizing that its illuminating, informative narration and its incredible ability to articulate our collec-
tive pain is an invaluable tool when examining gender relations. [...] We’re all winners when a space exists for bothers to honestly state and explore the roots of our pain and subsequently their misogyny, sans judgment” (80).

Arguably, despite the repellent misogyny of some of his rhymes, Biggie creates such a space on Life after Death. There, he and his protégé, Kimberley “Lil’ Kim” Jones, play dueling lovers in a dozens death match on the song “Another.” Before the hard-driving funk rhythm that the lyrics dance through begins, we hear the following prelude:

Biggie: Yeah... fuck you.
Kim: Fuck you too!
Biggie: Fuck you bitch.
Kim: Fuck you motherfucker.
Biggie: You ain’t shit anyway, fuck you.
Kim: You ain’t shit, you fat motherfucker.
Biggie: Yeah, whatever whatever—
Kim: Whatever—
Biggie: You wasn’t saying that when you was sucking my dick—
Kim: You wasn’t saying that when you was eating my pussy!
Kim: You a nasty motherfucker!
Biggie: Check it.
Kim: Crab ass!

Kim’s “fat motherfucker” interestingly echoes an insult from Tupac Shakur’s 1996 attack song “Hit ‘Em Up.” In that rap Shakur records his theory—widely dismissed as unfounded—that Biggie and “Puffy” Combs were behind his being shot five times in the lobby of a Times Square building where he had gone for a 1994 recording date. In the prose prelude to the song, Tupac declares, “I fucked your bitch you fat motherfucker.” He goes on to dis [disrespect] Biggie’s crew, including Lil’ Kim, and to refer to “Who Shot Ya”: “Who shot me—but your punks didn’t finish.” He proceeds to declare his artistic superiority (“Bad Boys [a reference to Biggie’s record label] murdered on wax”) as well as to issue what seem to be outright threats. Kim’s “fat motherfucker” brings the insult back within the family and suggests that Biggie takes it in his stride.

He and Lil’ Kim then proceed on “Another” to express their grievances with each other, adding to a misogyny-deconstructing sub-genre that includes the Ice Cube-Ya Yo duel on “It’s a Man’s World,” itself a Bloomean “strong misreading” of James Brown’s “This Is a Man’s World.” Biggie makes his case first, detailing an affair between the Kim character and another man—an affair in which the amorous pair thought “they was creepin’, took trips to V-A every third weekend,”

Shoulda left ya then, but my heart said not;
You knew too much, the relationship grew too much.
You knew about the crack vials, means to be trailed,
Way I hid dough under the bathroom tile;
Waited for a while; thought you was my right thing.
Then things got frightening.
Peeped the scene, sort of like Sam Rothstein—
Guess you Ginger, huh, go figure—
Never thought you could be a gold digger;
Take my dough and spend with the next nigga.
Asked my man Trigga, my ace boon coon.
Told me cut the bitch off 'fore the shit balloon.
Now I'm like Brandy, "Sitting in my Room,"
Pissy drunk listening to Stylistic tunes
Or the O'Jays, thinking 'bout the old days. . . .

What one hears of here are love, trust, and hope, disappointed, yes, but just as real as are
the recorded voices of the dead. As Morgan suggests, the rapper's hard exterior, especially
with regard to women, is in part a defensive stance. "Another" is evidence that the defense
can be penetrated. The reference in "Another" to Sam Rothstein, the central character of
Martin Scorsese's Casino and husband of the Ginger Biggie mentions, is a reference to a
man who loves unwisely but very deeply. Like the Rothstein reference, Biggie's version
of the refrain—"What do you do when your bitch is untrue? / You cut that hooker off
and find someone new / I need another bitch (another bitch) in my life"—suggests that
even a character with so much misogyny on his tongue is looking for an unbreakable
partnership in love. The point is bolstered by "Crush on You," a number that appears
on Kim's Biggie-produced debut CD, where Biggie plays the wannabe boyfriend, telling
the Queen Bee, "I know you seen me on the video / I know you heard me on the radio /
But you still don't pay me any attention / listening to what your girlfriends mention— /
'he's a slut, he's a ho, he's a freak / got a different girl every day of the week': / It's true
I'm trying to put a rush on you, / I gotta let you know that I got a crush on you." If this
is any indication, Biggie knew that the flip side description of the superstud he plays on
his own albums is the "ho" [whore] and the "freak" who has as much trouble being taken
seriously as the female "hos" and "freaks" on his own records.

What is more, Lil' Kim gets the last words in "Another":

Remember when you said you would die for me?
Shit, all of that was just lies to me.
Motherfucker shoulda never said bye to me.
Now you cry for me like Jodeci.
It's like that y'all, my nigga hit another bitch from the back y'all.
Black nasty and mad fat y'all; shoulda seen the ho.
Nigga pack your shit, you out the do'.
What about the fight in the Mirage?
I seen your Benz parked outside my sister's garage.
Said it was your friend Rog: Bullshit.
I ain't going keep putting up with the bullshit.
And still I never sweat these bitches
Who be hanged like plaques on the wall in your pictures.
. . . . . . . my love is concrete
stashing your heat in the passenger seat
of the Nautica jeep. We’ve been down for so long,
still a bitch like me trying to hold on;
tear-eyed, dam a bitch steaming.
Girls steady screaming: “Kim you need to leave him!”
When I testified in court,
Couldn’t think straight, thinking ’bout the bitches I fought
Over you . . .
. . . fuck you, leaving is my last resort.

You mad at me? Too bad she ain’t as bad as me.
Shoulda kept the freak bitch off my canopy.
Now you see, ain’t no pussy warm as mine,
Long as mine, ain’t no love as strong as this.
When I sucked your dick it was like smoking a roach:
I go from first class to coach.

The model of the lover here is the partner in crime (testifying in court, “stashing your heat [gun] in the passenger seat”). And, as is the case among coconspirators, loyalty is critical. Kim’s version of the chorus is “What do you do when your man is untrue? / You cut the sucker off and find someone new. / I need another man in my life.” Despite the discrepancy between her reference to “man” and Biggie’s reference to “bitch” and her own use of “black” as a negative adjective, her reprimands assert her equal power, as do her boasts about her superior sexual prowess and equipment. Emerging as it does out of all the profane signifying that surrounds it, “ain’t no love as strong as this” strikes the ear with a special force. It suggests an affection powerful enough to survive all the hope- and love-destroying forces that West and the other thinkers cited above describe. Kim, whose career Christopher Wallace was instrumental in launching, was clearly one of those Biggie referred to as “my niggas” when he told Interview magazine, “My niggas know I’m always gonna be there. I gotta help my niggas now, because they were there for me before all this rap shit came. Those are the niggas I was representin’. None of those other crazy motherfuckers would take a bullet for me.”

Indeed, the hardness celebrated in most of Biggie’s and his guest star’s lyrics follows from the same line of reasoning as crack commandments numbers five and seven: build an impenetrable wall between your true feelings and your loved ones, on the one hand, and the dangerous and unpredictable outside world, on the other. Kim’s reference to her love as “concrete,” again, suggests the kind of strength that love needs to have in a hostile racial and economic environment.

The hostility and danger of that environment, and the constant possibility that the environment and the game it makes necessary will invade the home (“I never thought you could be a gold digger”) is dramatized even more fully in the conclusion to “Ten Crack Commandments,” which Biggie renders with the Caravaggio-like vividness that is the hallmark of his best work:

Follow these rules you’ll have mad bread to break up.
If not, twenty-four years on the wake up:
Slug hit your temple, watch your frame shake up,
The caretaker did your makeup.
When you passed, your girl fucked my man Jacob;
Heard in three weeks she sniffed a whole half a cake up,
Heard she suck a good dick and could hook a steak up.
Gotta go, gotta go—more pots to bake up.

Failure to play the game correctly, in other words, leads to all the consequences the would-be rags-to-riches entrepreneur wants to avoid: death, inability to hold the loyalty of, or to provide financial or emotional protection for, one’s partner in crime and lover—who here descends to a depth of addiction (and presumably grief) that makes her easy prey for those who might have been rivals of the failed crack king. As a final contrast and final gesture of authority, the narrator returns in the last line to cooking up his crack rocks with Weberian-Tailorist Protestant zeal.

5. Limits of the Game

Christopher Wallace was well aware, of course, that even complete mastery of the game in all its incarnations did not guarantee that disaster would be avoided. It is not for nothing that the “autobiographical” prelude to his Ready to Die samples the Curtis Mayfield classic “Superfly,” where the cocaine dealer of the title is advised: “You’re gonna make your fortune by and by / but if you lose don’t ask no questions why / The only game you know is do or die....” Towards the end of “Sky’s the Limit,” in what is a continuation of the “Commandments” portrait of the crack business, Biggie raps,

After realizing, to master enterprising
I ain’t have to be in school by ten, I was in.
Began to encounter, with my counterparts
On how to burn the block apart, break it down in sections
Drugs by these selections,
Some use pipes, others use injections—
Syringe sold separately; Frank the deputy:
Quick to grab my Smith-n-Wesson like my dick was missing,
To protect my position, my corner, my lair.
While we out here, say the hustler’s prayer:
If the game shakes me or breaks me
I hope it makes me a better man....

The game here is like a dangerous river full of life-giving waters that can kill, so that the pursuit of mastery gives way to the hustler’s prayer. On “Missing You,” the closest thing to a love ballad on Life after Death, Biggie tells the tale of a close friend whom the game devoured. In the prose prelude to the rap, he tells of his efforts to get “my nigga O” out of the crack game and into rap, and how “my nigga be hyping it everywhere he go:

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me and Obie, me and Obie together. And the nigga be like, ‘when my man get on [gets a record contract] it’s going be some shit. We ain’t going have to sell this shit no more’—and he just got moped out [killed] like that, man. . . .” Biggie goes on to dedicate the song to “all the niggas that died in the struggle”—a group that would include himself by the time Life after Death was released.

Rapping over a midtempo beat sailing through melancholy strings, Biggie spins a typically vivid representation of the unexpected loss of O as the latter sought to escape the stress of the Brooklyn drug world: he also recounts the loss of a close female friend, Drew, after she becomes involved in a love triangle with a member of a group of “major players” and that member’s woman, Taya:

I remember selling three bricks of straight flour
Got my man a beat down to the third power.
He didn’t care, spent the money in a half hour.

. . .

In eighty-eight, when Kane ruled with “Half Steppin,”
A thirty-eight, a lot of mouth was our only weapon.

. . . . . . . . .

Fed up, my nigga want to take it down south
Sick of cops coming, sick of throwing jacks in his mouth.13
Gave him half my paper [money], told ’em to go that route.
Few months, he got his brains blown out.
Now I’m stressed: his baby mother, she’s trippin, blaming me
And his older brothers understand, the game it be
Kind of topsy-turvy—you win some, you lose some:
Damn, they lost a brother; they mother lost a son.
Fuck, why my nigga couldn’t stay in NY?
I’m a thug, but I swear for three days I cried.
I look in the sky and ask God why
Can’t look his baby girls in the eye.

As for Drew,

She used to hang while I slung my drugs after school.
She’d watch my bomb, help my moms with the groceries.
My little sister, the girl was kinda close to me,
A little closer than the average girl’s supposed to be,
Far from a lover, my girl was jealous of her.

When Drew begins her affair with the major player, she has a baby with him and is then discovered by his other “baby mother,” Taya, who

One night, across from the corner store,
. . . ran around the block with a chrome four-four
Squeezed all six shots in the passenger door.
The dude lived. What my baby had to die for?
Biggie’s love for those within his circle is unmistakable, as is his recognition that, whatever one’s level of mastery, the game is always a gamble.

The eleventh commandment, then, is that one must exit the crack game if a viable alternative—such as rap—makes itself available. On Ready to Die, an interview snippet has Biggie explaining that he entered the rap world because he was “tired of being on the streets. Had to get up off that.” Rap appeared to be an arena where one could go as far as one’s skills could take one. With skills second to none, Biggie hoped to triumph—and live a long life.14

The difficulty is that the street dialectic of seeking and being endangered by envy spills over into the rap world as Biggie experienced it. The hilarious mad rapper skit included on disc one of Life after Death satirizes this dangerous reality:

Mad Rapper: . . . I'ma tell you why I'm mad, you know what I'm sayin'? I'ma tell you why I'm mad. . . . These niggaz is making five hundred thousand dollar videos, you know what I'm sayin'? They driving around in hot cars. . . . They got bitches, they got all that shit—

Moderator: Sir, please, please refrain from your foul language—

Mad Rapper: You know what I'm saying? I'm making records—I ain't made no money yet . . . This is my fourth album, yo: this is my fourth album. I ain't made a dime yet. This nigga made one album, he making wild records. That Ready to Die shit, it was aight [all right], it was aight you know what I'm saying? That shit was aight, it was cool. But my shit is more John Blaze than that! . . .

A comic figure, the mad rapper is not really dangerous. But he is clearly linked to the former associates on Biggie’s “Warning” who “heard [Biggie’s] blowing up15 like nitro” and now “want to stick a knife through [his] windpipe slow.” These associates are linked in turn to those P. Diddy referred to after Biggie’s 1997 murder when he told Rolling Stone, “Nobody can tell me that just 'cause you a rapper, at the end of the day you get killed because you the flyest rapper? Motherfuckers are so jealous just ‘cause you the best?” (Gilmore 53). At the end of the posthumously released Born Again, Biggie’s mother, Voletta Wallace, speaks about her son’s worries about “playa haters” wounded by his success: “at a point in my son’s life he developed paranoia about death, about the dying. We’re living in a world of imperfect human beings where greed, jealousy, and envy are [provoked] by what others accomplished in life. My son was very much aware of that.”

6. The Mechanics of Stigma and Envy

In A Theory of Justice, his epic attempt to turn the imperfections of human beings to their own advantage, philosopher John Rawls, who makes self-respect fundamental to the well-being of persons and of a “well-ordered society,” discusses shame and envy in ways that illuminate the present discussion. Rawls writes that “we may characterize shame as the feeling that someone has when he experiences an injury to his self-respect or suffers
a blow to his self-esteem” (442). In the stigmatized world created by practices like those detailed by Massey and Denton, stigma creates a constant ache in the organs of self-esteem at the same time that it makes it more difficult to eliminate that ache because of the concrete, red-lined form that stigma takes. This explains the focus on honor and protection of one’s reputation that causes the Biggie persona to sew alligators on his shirts and rob his mocker in “Sky’s the Limit.” It also explains what in a more affluent environment might be taken as excessive investment in symbols of prosperity as well as excessive retaliation to a slight. Stigma, as negative credit, is a kind of being-consuming gunpowder that the spark of shame can light. Glenn C. Loury asserts that

An awareness of the racial ‘otherness’ of blacks is embedded in the social consciousness of the American nation owing to the historical fact of slavery and its aftermath. This inherited stigma even today exerts an inhibiting effect on the extent to which African Americans can realize their full human potential. (5)

Loury later explains that racial stigma consists of “dishonorable meanings socially inscribed on arbitrary bodily marks, of ‘spoiled collective identities’” (59). He goes on to link his conception to that of Orlando Patterson’s trope of “social death” as a universal condition of slavery. Stigma in this context can be viewed as the leftover dishonor of slavery. Indeed, stigma is the leftover lack of self-ownership and self-control of slavery, which, after all, is in its absolute sense a condition in which one is owned and controlled by another. This suggests that, as stigma increases, the sense of self-ownership and autonomy decreases. Indeed, where stigma is present, self-esteem is more fragile, and, being breakable, is in relatively short supply, so that stigma-reducing objects—objects that are widely esteemed in one’s area or in the wider society—become especially prized. In America, money is the ultimate signifier of achievement and indeed of worth and self-worth. But as stigma increases and as stigma-reducing objects such as money become scarce, the stigmatized become increasingly like marionettes whose movements in the direction of jobs, housing, power, and status are controlled by forces outside the self. Whatever stigma-reducing objects are available then become forms of wealth, worth counterfeiting (as Biggie does in “Sky is the Limit”) and, from some points of view, worth fighting over.

What can follow from such a situation but anxiety, frustration, anger, injured self-respect, shame—coupled with the inventiveness that is sparked by hypersensitivity to changes in the environment: opportunities and risks encircling one like a storm? One manifestation of this sensitivity and inventiveness is entrepreneurialism. The other is envy, which monitors the constantly morphing distribution of opportunities and risks. The mad rapper’s anger and envy result in part from bewilderment at not being able to “flow” through the tricky beat of these opportunities and risks. Indeed, behind the envy, there is fear of being left behind in the race to flow through risk and unpeel stigma by acquiring stigma-reducing objects such as flashy cars, expensive videos, and women (perceived through a-stigma-tised eyes as sources of self-esteem rather than independent people).

In the stigmatized environment, what John Rawls calls “the Aristotelian Principle”—the presumption that “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and the enjoyment increases the more the
capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity” (426)—is confronted by what might be called a “Plutocratic principle”—that, things being perceptibly unequal (as they are in poor neighborhoods in a wealthy country), there is a widespread expectation of unrealized capacities, with likelihood of achievement decreasing as greater exercise or greater complexity in the use of a capacity (innate or trained) is sought. The clash between the Aristotelian and Plutocratic principles result, again, in entrepreneurialism and envy, or even the despair of which Cornel West writes.16

Rawls argues that self-worth depends on “(1) having a rational plan of life, and in particular one that satisfies the Aristotelian Principle; and (2) finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed. [. . .] Moreover, the more someone experiences his own way of life as worth fulfilling, the more likely he is to welcome our attainments” (440). Following from this last point, the less a person experiences his own way of life as worth fulfilling—and therefore psychologically fulfilling—the less likely he is to welcome others’ attainments. The lower his estimate of the way of life he is pursuing, the more likely he is to be ashamed of his position and envious of those who appear more prosperous, or even more self-satisfied.17

Rawls defines envy as “the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we does not detract from our advantages” (532). He goes on to distinguish “benign envy” (which is characterized more by wonder than hostility), “emulative envy” (which spurs one to achieve what the other has achieved rather than destroy the other) and “excusable envy” (which springs from tremendous socially constructed gaps in the basic conditions of well-being18) from the down-and-dirty envy that is “collectively disadvantageous.”

The envy that haunted Biggie’s lyrics and his life is a mixture of all four varieties in which down-and-dirty envy predominates. Robert Nozick, responding to Rawls, argued in his book Anarchy, State, and Utopia that envy is so fundamental to social life that it can never be eliminated. Nozick examines the possibility of reducing resentful envy by “equalizing positions along that particular dimension upon which self-esteem [in a given society] is (happens to be) importantly based” (244). Nozick argues that whatever is more or less equally distributed—the ability to speak, for instance—is taken for granted and that self-esteem and envy seek out the distinctions that remain. As a result, he suggests, envy can no more be eliminated than can the search for self-esteem. Nevertheless, where stigma exists, envy can be rubbed raw and raised to dangerous extremes.

Out of his fears of exacerbated envy and his desire to stop it in its tracks spring Biggie’s occasional claims to being chosen (“God made me / to push [drive] a Bentley,” he raps on “My Downfall”). From the same sources as well as from his dramatist’s instincts, come his far more frequent, because more riveting and sometimes more effective, claims to rap and 9-millimeter omnipotence: “See how dark it gets when you’re marked for death? / Should I start your breath or should I let you die?” he asks on “Kick in the Door.” On “Long Kiss Goodnight,” he warns, “Face it, we hard to hit” before limning one of his signature warnings-become-prophecies of the doom that waits for Biggie-haters: “You try to rush me / slugs go touchy-touchy / you’re bleeding lovely / with your spirit above me—or below me / your whole life you lived sneaky / now you rest eternally sleepy. / You burn when you creep me / . . . Look what you made me do: / brains blew. . . .” Though the poetic achievement in these lines is uneven, Biggie achieves the mixture of terror and beauty
that has been associated with the sublime in his image of the soul of the murdered enemy hovering above him.

Discussing what he calls the “dynamically sublime” in his Critique of Judgment, Immanuel Kant associates the sublime with the quality of mind brought forth by aspects of nature or circumstance that dwarf human capacities of resistance but which thereby release latent powers of imagination, self-knowledge and self-mastery. It is the ability to confront the sublime, Kant argues, that creates admiration for the man “who shrinks from nothing, who fears nothing, and therefore does not yield to danger, but goes to face it vigorously with the most complete deliberation” (127). Though Kant, even after being briefed on what has taken place in the centuries since his death, would surely disapprove of the Biggie persona’s gargantuan appetites, he would probably recognize the insight involved in Christopher Wallace’s use of the Biggie persona to bridge the gap between himself and the literally larger-than-life dangers that the crack world throws into sharp relief.

His rhymed exploration of dangers that dwarf human powers of risk management and, in particular, his fear of being envied to death, produces a masterpiece at the end of Life after Death—“You’re Nobody Till Somebody Kills You,” the composition Biggie himself reportedly liked best. Set to an eerie high-pitched loop that is as ominous as razor wire, and that recalls the disturbed, clock-chiming riff that enacts time running out on Ready to Die’s “Suicidal Thoughts,” “You’re Nobody Till Somebody Kills You” sums up all the mayhem and sex that have come before it. But it adds a tremendous existential depth that is missing from the more sadistic and violently misogynistic rhymes to which Biggie, at his least inventive, is susceptible.

The tone is set at the outset, when P. Diddy reads Psalm 23. The famous lines “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” and “you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies” have special resonance at the end of a CD more obsessed with enemies than with lovers—a CD that, together with Ready to Die, is a grand tour of the Valley of Death and the rewards of getting out of it. The performance of the psalm underscores the biblical roots of even Biggie’s most amoral—one might say most morally inverted—verses. The eye-for-an-eye world he paints is a strange distorted image of the world of Psalm 23, and, even more, the world of Psalm 27, which, according to Ronin Ro, Biggie paid to have tattooed on his arm in Los Angeles, in 1997, not long before his assassination (100).

Psalm 27 is especially relevant to Biggie’s efforts at this time, in radio interviews, to encourage audiences to get to know the real, loveable Big Poppa,19 and to allow the calming of the dangerous waters stirred first by Tupac Shakur’s accusations against him and then by the latter’s 1996 assassination:

The Lord is my life and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my Life; of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When the wicked, even my enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell.

3 Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.

4 One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life . . . .

5 For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion; in the
secret of his tabernacle he shall hide me; he shall set me up upon a rock.

6 And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me: therefore will I offer in his tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord.

......

12 Deliver me not over unto the will of mine enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty.

......

Like the psalmist himself, the “gangsta” desires to be protected from his foes and slanderers and to have the necessity and essential justice of his actions recognized: to have those who oppose and threaten him (an anonymous envious caller promises to “kill you, motherfucker” on one track of Life After Death) stumble and fall into the fire of their own wickedness. It is significant, though, that Biggie Smalls does not pronounce the psalm himself, inasmuch as the cry to the higher power smacks of an “old school” spirituality in which one’s destiny is placed in the hands of the invisible divine, and not in the clip and chamber of one’s pistol or the fiery mouth of one’s eloquence. Open appeal to the divine compromises the autonomy that makes the gangsta the master of his fate and the living law of his environment. Open appeal to the divine is something that Christopher Wallace, still only 24 when he was gunned down, might have been tempted to make, but that the larger-than-life Biggie Smalls can do only in the overtones of his odes to the game. To see exactly what this means for the larger implications of Wallace’s ouevre, and to place “You’re Nobody Till Somebody Kills You” in its most illuminating context, it will be useful here to briefly digress, and to look at some earlier instances of Biggie questioning the gangsta life before returning to “You’re Nobody.”

7. Suicidal Thoughts

The precursor of “You’re Nobody” is “Suicidal Thoughts,” a rap in the form of a late-night phone call confession to P. Diddy (also known as Puff Daddy and Puffy and, of course, Sean Combs), and the lyric that “You’re Nobody Till Somebody Kills You” most clearly harks back to. It is the lyric where the Notorious B.I.G. character comes closest to seeking out the house of the Lord, but where he realizes that his code and his identity, built for a risk-filled, stigmatized world, will not allow him to cross the threshold:

When I die, fuck it, I wanna go to hell
Cause I’m a piece of shit, it ain’t hard to fucking tell.
It don’t make sense going to heaven with the goodie-goodies
Dressed in white. I like black Tims and black hoodies.
God’ll probably have me on some real strict shit:
No sleeping all day, no getting my dick licked.
Hanging with the goodie-goodies, lounging in paradise:
Fuck that shit, I want to tote guns and shoot dice.
All my life I been considered as the worst—
Lying to my mother, even stealing out her purse:
Crime after crime, from drugs to extortion.
I know my mother probably wish she got a fucking abortion.
She don’t even love me like she did when she was younger,
Sucking on her chest just to stop her fucking hunger.
I wonder if I died would tears come to her eyes,
Forgive me for my disrespect, forgive me for my lies.
My baby mother’s eight months, her little sister’s two.
Who’s to blame for both of them?

[P. Diddy]: No nigga, not you.

I swear to God I just want to slit my wrists and end this bullshit,
Throw the magnum to my head threatening to pull shit.
... squeeze, till the bed’s completely red. I’m glad I’m dead.
A worthless fucking Buddha head.
Stress is building up—I can’t, I can’t release
Suicide’s on my fucking mind, I want to leave.
I swear to God I feel like death is fucking calling me—
Naw you wouldn’t understand—

[P. Diddy]: Nigga, talk to me please!

You see it’s kinda like the crack did to Pookie, in New Jack
Except when I cross over, there ain’t no coming back.
Should I die on the train track like Remo in Beatstreet?
People at the funeral fronting like they miss me
My baby momma kissed me but she’s glad I’m gone
She know me and her sister had something going on.
I reach my peak, I can’t speak,
Call my nigger Chic, tell him that my will is weak.
I’m sick of niggas lying, I’m sick of bitches squaking.
Matter of fact, I’m sick of talking.

[fires pistol; phone heard dropping to floor]

Just as giant stars collapse when they can no longer pour out sufficient radiance, the
gangsta persona who earlier on the CD proclaims himself so dangerous as to be “crazier
than a bag of fucking angel dust,” implodes when he views himself from the perspec-
tive of the old school morality that “the game” upends but that he longs ultimately to be
validated by. Everything he regrets in the brilliant couplets of “Suicidal Thoughts”—with
the exception, significantly, of the disrespecting of his mother—is celebrated elsewhere
in his oeuvre. The mother, as various commentators have pointed out, remains a sacred
figure in African American culture. And though the mother is implicitly criticized on Ready
to Die for not providing the money that might prevent the Biggie Smalls character from
venturing into crime (“My mother didn’t give me what I want, what the fuck. / Now I got

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a Glock making motherfuckers duck”) the criticism stops there, having only been made in the first place as a way of building the Biggie myth of invincibility.

In “Respect,” another masterpiece from Ready to Die in which moral conflict—embodied in the mother and her alternative code—rears its head, Biggie begins with a mythical birth worthy of Muddy Waters, escaping a hit that is almost carried out against him by his own umbilical chord: “umbilical chord’s wrapped around my neck. / I’m seeing my death and I ain’t even took my first step.” He therefore enters the world as someone who has already bested the most fearsome enemy humankind faces: “New York, New York ready for the likes of this?” But as the song goes on, the invincibility fades and the mother speaks with a traditional wisdom that reveals the clash between what Elijah Anderson calls “street” and “decent” morality. “Check yourself before you wreck yourself, disrespect yourself,” his mother warns, sketching the decent path: “Put the drugs on the shelf.” But—“nah! I couldn’t see it,” Biggie admits: “Scarface came to New York, I wanna be it.”20. By the end of “Respect,” however, he risen into the rap world, is no longer the “same deranged child stuck up in the game,” and has chosen a “decent” life that brings smiles to his mother’s face.

In “Suicidal Thoughts” all the bravado has drained away. Here the mother is simultaneously an incarnation of “decent” morality,21 and, on the one hand, someone whose good intentions are blocked by a social structure that does not sufficiently protect self-esteem, but instead fosters what Biggie elsewhere calls “stereotypes of a black male misunderstood.” As the self-accusations of “Suicidal Thoughts” pour out, we hear the flip side of the anger and desire that drives Biggie through barrier after moral barrier on other songs. Asking this time not whether people fear him enough not to challenge him, but whether they love him enough to venerate his memory when he is gone—or to simply meet him without masks while he is alive and in need of uncut affection, Biggie is full of doubt and despair. The rigors of the game separate him from the universe of trust and the confidence of the psalmist as much as crack addiction separated the character Pookie in New Jack City from the anti-crack moral center of that film.

The question raised by “Suicidal Thoughts,” and the other passages on Ready to Die, of which it is the summation, is fundamental to Biggie’s work: how does one maintain a minimal sphere of trust and trustworthiness, and how does one avoid what Rawls calls “moral shame”—the consciousness that one has done deeds that are contrary to one’s sense of right and justice—without being ground up in the game as a result? One’s “crew” is obviously vital to this endeavor, but here the phone call to the crew member and the poured-out confession cannot compensate for the sudden flare up of the old morality, on the one hand, and the inability to see a way out of the game, on the other hand.

bell hooks argues that one source of the sort of collapse of self-esteem Biggie expresses in “Suicidal Thoughts” is abandonment of a “communalist ethic that placed a high value on compassion, sharing, justice, to an ethic of individualism whose credo was ‘I’ve got mine, you have to get yours’” (216). The concept of the “crew” so prominent in Biggie’s music and in hip hop, however, suggests that individualism is not all. The real danger is that “the game” will invade even the crew (”I’m sick of niggas lying”) and the persona created for the game will invade the “true G,” who in one lyric takes care of a jailed crew member’s family. hooks, adapting language from Nathaniel Branden, stresses that personal integrity is a critical pillar of self-esteem and that without it the self is in danger. But how to
maintain integrity when, to preserve old school morality within family and crew, one must violate that morality outside family and crew? What we overhear on “Suicidal Thoughts” is the shattering of the pillar of self-esteem by these contradictory pressures.

The wonder is that, in enacting his “Suicidal Thoughts” confession, Biggie affirms the honesty and loyalty that is at the core of gangsta—as of old school—morality. “There is no lying in you,” is the compliment given to Scarface’s Tony Montoya, a model for gangsta rap personas. Nevertheless, the violence with which the Biggie Smalls character strives to defend the sphere of trust and integrity—even to the point of executing himself when he himself threatens it—is for hooks another source of the suffering that plagues African America:

When we reexamine our history we see African-American antiracist resistance move from being rooted in a love ethic and a moral philosophy centered on peace and reconciliation to a rhetoric and practice of violence. This embracing of violence as an accepted means of solving conflict and social control was an endorsement of the very politics of domination that was at the heart of antiblack terrorism. [...] Once this way of violent thinking became more of a norm in black life, the life-affirming values that had been at the heart of the antiracist struggle and constructive coping with the psychological impact of race were undermined. (25)

In the wake of the crack era, hooks’s point is irrefutable. Yet it is proper to remember that the love ethic most eloquently expressed in the words of Martin Luther King was called into question when it seemed to fall short—when King was murdered, and the value of a reputation for being not-to-be-trifled-with—the beginnings of the gangsta ethic that is full blown in Biggie—began to take center stage.

Part of the greatness of Biggie’s body of work lies in its ability to express the full reality, with its contradictions and conflicting emotions, of the gangsta ethic and the “game” that grows of it: “You’re Nobody Till Somebody Kills You” is a capstone effort in this regard. “Niggas in my faction don’t like asking questions,” Biggie begins, “strictly gun-testing, coke measuring.” The verse goes on to raise up again in our ears the merciless, high-living, invincible Notorious B.I.G. (“as my pilot steers my Lear / shit’s official, only the Feds I fear . . . . so don’t you get suspicious / I’m big dangerous. You’re just a little vicious. . . . death controls ya’ll. Big don’t fold ya’ll.”) The chorus, however, tells a different story, a tale of universal vulnerability and dread in a world defined by the volatile mix of stigma, envy, wealth, and games with real deaths in them that even the most feared cannot ultimately control:

You’re nobody till somebody kills you.
(I don’t wanna die. God, tell me why.)
You’re nobody till somebody kills you.

Playing on the famous line “you’re nobody till somebody loves you,” from the much-recorded classic of the same name, the chorus evokes, as a negative evokes a photograph, a lost and longed-for world of security and affection. In the next verse, Biggie orient the
listener with references to films about small-time criminals who struggle to control, rather than be controlled by, the game:

Watch *Casino*, I'm the hip hop version of Nicky Tarantino.  
Ask Nino, he know, green with envy, the green tempts me  
To make the rich the enemy and take their cheese [money],  
Take their spot, make my faculty live ever after in laughter  
Never seen Cristal pour faster, till the bastards—knuckleheads—  
squeeze lead.  
Three of mine dead. Nothing left to do but tear their ass to shreds,  
Leave 'em in bloodshed. . . .

The fragility of power and the way that envy, like rust, never sleeps and never lets one rest—either because one's position and self-esteem is too weak or too strong, is memorably summed up here. The reference to Nicky Santoro (Biggie changes the name for the rhyme's sake, a rare sign of struggle that appears once or twice more in the course of the song) calls up the image of an out-of-control but widely feared enforcer, drunk on ambition, who ends up dead. Nino, referred to in the next line, is of course the charismatic and utterly ruthless crack dealer who drives the plot of *New Jack City*. The fact that he too pays the price after rising to the heights of power and wealth suggests that Biggie, in this rap, is tracing the curve of a Faustian bargain.

It is a Faustian bargain made by a young man who wants the life he sees in the movies and rap videos. Indeed, Christopher Wallace, the twenty-something young man dazzled by Biggie Smalls’s success, seems to emerge in the next verse where, after wiping out his enemies, The Notorious B.I.G. comments that after

Incidents like this  
I take trips, lay up in Miami with Tamika and Tammi,  
Some Creole C-O bitches I met on tour  
Push a peach legend coupe, gold teeth galore.  
Tell me meet 'em in the future later,  
They'll take me shopping buy me lavender and fuchsia gators—  
Introduce me to playa haters and heavy waiters—  
rich bitch shit—drinking Cristal till they piss the shit.  
Thorough bitches, adapt-to-any-borough bitches  
Be in spots where there were no bitches,  
You feel me reminisce on dead friends too.  
You're nobody till somebody kills you.

The kid learning the ins and outs of the advanced stages of the game is still a kid who enjoys being taken shopping and introduced to high-class eateries and their denizens. Despite his use of the offensive word “bitches,” it is clear that Biggie, to an extent, admires and seeks to learn from these versatile players who drink so much champagne that they urinate it.

But the old violent grief-streaked life touches this scene also. Biggie recalls dead friends, preparing the way for the final and most powerful verse on the track—the verse that makes
“You’re Nobody,” like “Suicidal Thoughts,” a quiet jeremiad on the wages sometimes paid for ambitions like Nicky Santoro’s and Nino’s:

You could be the shit, flash the fattest five,  
Have the biggest dick, but when your shell get hit  
You ain’t worth spit, just a memory—  
Remember he used to push the champagne Range (P. Diddy: I remember that)  
Silly cat, wore suede in the rain  
Swear he put the G in game, had the Gucci frame  
Before Dana Dane, thought he ran with Kane.  
I can’t recall his name. (P. Diddy: What’s his name?)  
You mean that kid that nearly lost half his brain over two bricks of cocaine,  
Getting his dick sucked by crackhead Lorraine?  
A fucking shame, duke’s [guy’s] a lame. What’s his name?  
Dark-skinned Germaine—see what I mean?

The paradox of the chorus—that you are nobody until you have made enough of a mark to provoke someone to rub it out and turn you into a fading memory—is the paradox of the world in which Biggie and the man who became his archrival, Tupac Shakur, lived and died. Dark-skinned Germaine is the Icarus everyone in the game (as Biggie described it) is in danger of becoming. In telling his story, Biggie appeals not to God, but to the hip hop community to “see what I mean”: to see the destructiveness of playing the game too recklessly (“Silly cat, wore suede in the rain”).

Christopher Wallace himself exited the crack game and crafted the Notorious B.I.G. image as a means of escaping danger and want and carrying his neighborhood crew along with him. In 2003, six years after he was shot while the SUV carrying him waited at a red light, rumors abound as to why he was slain and by whom. Theories have him being gunned down because he owed money for bodyguard services to gang members, or because he was behind the hit on Tupac Shakur, or because he was marked for death by Death Row Records head Suge Knight, who was seeking to cover up the fact that he himself had taken out the contract on Tupac Shakur’s life. His mother Voletta suspects his killers were the “playa haters” he came to fear.

In fact, the true tale of Christopher Wallace’s death may never be told, but the tragedy of it is the too-familiar African American one of lost genius, a tragedy nowhere more eerily noted than on Tupac Shakur’s posthumously released and chillingly prophetic dirge, “God Bless the Dead.” Like a threat that still contains the hope of reconciliation, the piece opens with Tupac calling, “Rest in peace to my motherfucking Biggie Smalls. That’s right boy, it’s going on, right here. . . .” Biggie is present, too, in the first verse, but more as an admired fellow striver than as despised enemy:

God bless the dead and buried.  
Nigga, don’t worry if you see God first.  
Tell him shit got worse, I ain’t mad.
I know you representing the crew,
And I can picture you in heaven with a blunt and a brew.
Fuck the world, pain was a part of the game.
If you a baller, money went as quick as it came.
My role models—gone or they locked in the pen.
Straight hustlers, caught up in the whirlwind.
The other day I thought I seen my homeboy Biggie
Saying shit don’t stop, nigga: no pity.
We all hoods, and all we ever had was dreams.
Money making motherfuckers plot scandalous schemes.
In the gutter, you learn to have a criminal mind.
I was addicted to tryin. . . .

The assertion of kinship and ultimate reconciliation that fills these lines is the true route out of the verbal and literal arms race in which Shakur came to believe he was caught with Biggie Smalls. Biggie’s final trip to California was his own effort to end the arms and death race that he knew had come to include Shakur’s supporters and mourners. The difficulty of finding a solution stable enough not to break up under the bombardment of stigma, shame, ambition, and entrepreneurial imperatives is a difficulty of disarmament, on the one hand, and poetics on the other. Conflict theorist Thomas Schelling has noted that even in retaliatory strikes in war, there is likely to be a need to “communicate or coordinate on limits.” As the hip hop community itself recognized in the wake of the murders of Shakur and Wallace, a crucial limit that needs to be observed is the one between the performer and the personae he creates. It is a line which Shakur, the more fully developed if not the greater poet of the two, is widely noted to have had trouble keeping sight of. Christopher Wallace appears to have treasured the line. He withdrew from the limelight for a time after his first success, in part because of the rivalry and rancor he discovered where he had expected backstage harmony.

Nevertheless, in a game where street credibility is a key form of artistic capital, the poetics of Biggie Smalls fatally blurred the line between artist and persona. This may be because, as a rapper, Wallace, like any poet, strove to drive the genre he worked in—and language itself—to their limits: to so ingeniously entwine phrase, beat and self-mythologizing that his works would superconduct, sweeping aside the audience’s resistance, carrying not only meanings but whole experiences, stigma free, into listener’s minds, turning interpersonal and cultural barriers into superconducting communications devices.

Part of the tragedy of the deaths of Biggie and Tupac lies in the fact that they transmuted so many barriers not only by bragging about their differences but also by working with the surviving universals of our time: death, warfare, desire, longing without limit, dread, envy, and, above all, hunger to keep the risks posed by all these things at bay. Hardcore rap’s ability to set such universals to irresistible beats is a key part of its global appeal: For many of the more traditional sources of joy in our day have guns to their otherworldly heads, threats in their mailboxes. In our day, the artist does not, as Dante did, have the possibility of drawing on universal symbols of harmony that lead all the way from the depths of hell to the presence of God without any loss of detail.
Nowadays, language more readily superconducts along the fracture lines of populations and systems of belief—along lines where anxiety and the need for catharsis are greatest. True, these fracture lines are guarded by guns, by the security systems of gated communities such as those in which the present vice president of the United States lives, and by the red lining mentioned earlier in this essay. Dante’s “love that moves the sun and the other stars” is everywhere longed for, but no longer taken for granted as a universal common denominator. Rap like Biggie’s, full of all the dangers and striving in the world, superconducts in the sense that it induces listeners to translate their identity styles (including modes of speech and dress) into the terms set forth by the rapper. Rap’s much-remarked influence on white suburban teens and young people from France to Japan is evidence of its superconductivity, and its ability to resurrect the universals that still bind humanity together. God bless the dead.

NOTES

1. Of course, the grandfather ultimately meant that racism should be yessed to death by saying “yes” to the principles enshrined in America’s founding documents in the face of betrayals of those principles. Biggie’s gangsta persona and his real life rap identity, as this essay will show, says yes to America’s economic ideal of rich rewards flowing from relentless dedication and ingenuity in one’s task.

2. Houston A. Baker, Jr. links the uproar surrounding the case with hip hop’s climb up the Billboard charts, official outrage over the sexuality and violence of its lyrics, and traditional denial of capital to neighborhoods like those from which both the teenagers and rap music came. Baker argues that “rap economics [including the booming presence of hip hop music broadcast in New York public spaces by “ghetto blasters”], in contest with the public law and the law of the ‘public’ [space], had more to do with [the interpretations and outrage surrounding] the Central Park jogger incident as a moral panic . . . than anything else”; see Baker 50.

As for the five convicted young men, none were choirboys. But nor were they the depraved sociopaths whom news reports depicted and pundits and politicians cried out against. Indeed, in retrospect, they are poster boys for the distrust of the police that is prevalent in rap music.

3. In her brilliant book Black Noise, Tricia Rose points out a sort of socioeconomic hollowing out of New York’s South Bronx that began with deindustrialization, was exacerbated by the “forced relocation of 170,000 people” carried out to clear the way for the Cross Bronx Expressway, and made headlines as a result of looting in New York’s poor neighborhoods that followed a 1977 power outage. The result, Rose writes, was that images of abandoned buildings in the South Bronx became central popular cultural icons. Negative local color in popular film exploited the devastation facing the residents of the South Bronx and used their communities as a backdrop for social ruin and barbarism. As Michael Ventura astutely notes, these popular depictions (and I would add, the news coverage as well) rendered silent the people who struggled with and maintained life under difficult conditions. . . . Although city leaders and the popular press had literally and figuratively condemned the South Bronx neighborhoods and their inhabitants, its youngest black and Hispanic residents answered back with hip hop. (33–34)

4. Note: blunts are cigarette paper stuffed with marijuana; yayo is cocaine.

5. Bakari Kitwana points out that the hip hop world has been carved out in part by globalization: “The mid-1970s to the mid-1980s were critical years in establishing the new economy. During these years, the corporate practice of exporting low-skilled manufacturing jobs became commonplace. National unemployment rates, particularly Black youth unemployment rates, skyrocketed. In the preceding decade, the poverty rate had steadily declined from 30 percent in 1960 to 11.1 percent by 1973” (33). Kitwana goes on to argue that “The distance between the American dream as presented in the mass media and the degree to which it is increasingly unattainable for most Americans helped to fuel the Los Angeles riots [that followed the acquittal of the policemen who beat Rodney King]” (43).
6. Life in this case is more complicated than art. Christopher Wallace grew up in a neighborhood through which both law-abiding professionals and drug dealers moved. Despite his mother’s efforts to steer him towards the law-abiding side of the street, and despite the fact that he easily made the honor roll when he attended school regularly, he chose the quick dollar he saw the drug dealers making.

7. “Bricks” are bricks of cocaine; “clips” are clips of ammunition.

8. Note: “gassed up” means high; a “hoodie” is a sweatshirt with a hood.

9. Steven R. Belenko reports that the “short-duration high and crash appear to be what drives the crack-smoking binges, sometimes lasting several days, that are so commonly described in the literature” (36).

10. According to Coker, Christopher Wallace in his drug dealing incarnation had “no conscience,” even shocking his associates once by breaking their taboo against selling to pregnant women. “It ain’t,” Wallace reasoned, “like she gonna go home and be like ‘Well, Biggie didn’t give it to me, I’m going to sleep. . . . I didn’t get in this game to feel sympathy for nobody’” (39).

11. In her new book Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem, bell hooks asserts that the Lil’ Kim character is “the ‘personification of a childlike ho’” and the rapper, insecure because her African American features, has little self-esteem. In addition, hooks argues, the “more Lil’ Kim distorted her natural beauty to become a cartoonlike caricature of whiteness [for instance by sporting blond wigs and blue contacts], the larger her success.” There is truth in this, and Lil’ Kim is far more striking without the blond wig, but the platinum status of her first album, where she appears without contacts and sporting dark (albeit straightened) hair, surely is the result of her rhyming skills and a wit that won high praise for her third solo effort, La Bella Mafia, from none other than The Source, the magazine that a young Christopher Wallace dreamed of being in. “In the spirit of the gangland fable, where widows of murdered mafia kingpins go on the rampage,” Kim Osorio and Jerry L. Barrow (2003) declared, “Lil’ Kim is standing on her own two stilettos. . . . She strongly spits, ‘Fuck what you say about me/Fact is, I’m the legacy of B.I.G.’” The Source features an excerpt from a lyric lambasting backstabbing members of Biggie’s “Junior M.A.F.I.A” entourage that includes what sounds like a feminist declaration (K.I.M. style, of course): “Enough is enough, I washed my hands, I’m done wit’it/ Keep the fam[ily] together, God knows I tried/ But shit ain’t been the same since B.I. died/ Little Kim, the first rap bitch to shake up the charts/ Act like I ain’t leading this million bitch march. . . .” (143, 148)

12. The fact that in real life Biggie did ensure that Kim had an independent voice and career, suggests that his practice was less sexist than some of his preaching. Of course, bell hooks criticizes not only the persona he helped Kim create, but also, it seems, the mode of interaction she and Biggie adopt on “Another.” According to hooks, “Black people often brag about sadistic teasing and valorize it under the heading of a cultural cool by calling it ‘signifying’” (152). But the fact remains that the Biggie-Kim verbal joust, and others like it, is a display of mental dexterity as much as it is of outrage, and the participants feed on their own eloquence, and draw strength from it.

13. Note: “Jacks” are crack containers. According to Cheo Hodari Coker (2003), Christopher Wallace himself once had a run-in with the law that resulted in his having to hide “jacks” he wished to sell in his mouth.

14. Todd Boyd writes that “For Biggie, rap parallels his own move from the slavery of ghetto life to the perceived freedom of middle class existence. . . . The passage of gangsta rap out of the oppressive conditions of the ghetto, its use as a vehicle for middle-class mobility, not only is surprising, considering the hard posture of nonconformity associated with it, but also confounds those who have suggested that the genre is dead. Instead of dying off, the music reinvents itself by recognizing the benefits of a so-called normal existence, and by maintaining the hard edge in perspective that has been its foundation” (138).

15. “Blowing up” means “making it big.”

16. Entrepreneurialism—like that of such hip-hop tycoons as Dr. Dre and the controversial Suge Knight—conforms to what Rawls calls a rational plan, which “allows a person to flourish so far as circumstances permit, and to exercise his realized abilities as much as he can” (429).

17. bell hooks argues in Rock My Soul that “the white supremacist mass media, broadcasting images of predatory young black males and light skin and straight hair as prerequisites of female beauty, continues a long American tradition of ‘shaming’ [African Americans] about [their] skin color and [their] bodies.” Hooks states that the self-esteem issue is insidious, largely overlooked, and present not only among the economically disenfranchised, but even among highly successful African Americans: “Many black folks remained [in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras] psychologically stuck in internalized shame about skin color, hair texture, and the overall black body, unable to acquire the necessary self-regard to develop healthy self-esteem” (45–46).

18. In Rawls’s own words, “A person’s lesser position as measured by the index of objective primary goods [including rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth and a sense of the fact that he easily made the honor roll when he attended school regularly, he chose the quick dollar he saw the drug dealers making.

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18. In Rawls’s own words, “A person’s lesser position as measured by the index of objective primary goods [including rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth and a sense
of one’s own worth] may be so great as to wound his self-respect . . . Indeed, we can resent being made envious, for society may permit such large disparities in these goods that under existing social conditions these differences cannot help but cause a loss of self-esteem . . . When envy is a reaction to the loss of self-respect in circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently, I shall say it is excusable” (534).

19. He says as much in an interview excerpted on Life after Death: “It’s reality, man. You can’t hide the truth. It’s going to be seen. There’s killings. I’m just the narrator, you know. . . . I’m just letting you know, this is what happens. Can’t be mad at me. Just get to know me. To know me is to love me . . .”

20. Christopher Wallace had similar disputes with his mother, as Coker (2003) reports.

21. Elijah Anderson notes that in inner-city neighborhoods “The decent family and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation. . . . Most residents are decent or are trying to be. The same family is likely to have members who are strongly oriented toward decency and civility, whereas other members are oriented toward the street. . . . There is also a great deal of ‘code-switching’: a person may behave according to either set of rules, depending on the situation. Decent people, especially young people, often put a premium on the ability to code-switch. They share many of the middle-class values of the wider white society but know that the open display of such values carries little weight on the street” (35–36).

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