CHAPTER 8

The House That Race Built: Some Observations on the Use of the Word *Nigga*, Popular Culture, and Urban Adolescent Behavior

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Niggers are scared of revolution but niggers shouldn't be scared of revolution because revolution is nothing but change, and all niggers do is change. Niggers come in from work and change into pimping clothes to hit the street and make some quick change. Niggers change their hair from black to red to blond and hope like hell their looks will change. Niggers kill others just because one didn't receive the correct change. Niggers always going through bullshit changes. But when it comes for a real change Niggers are scared of revolution.

—"Niggers are scared of revolution," The Last Poets (1970)

And being that we use it as a term of endearment . . .
Now the little shorties say it all over town
And a whole bunch of Niggaz throw the word around
Yo I start to flinch as I try not to say it
But my lips are like ohh I betta starts to spray it . . .
Hey Sucka Nigga who ever you are . . .

—"Sucka Nigga," Tribe Called Quest (1993)

What is the political and social significance of the word *Nigga*—on the playground, in the street, on the corner, and in educational and public spaces? Is the word *Nigga* part of the pleasures and politics of Black working-class culture? Is the word *Nigger* part of the pain and patriarchy of working-

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class White culture? What is the trajectory of the word *Nigger/Nigga* and its relationship to other communities usually not defined as Black or working-class? Too often language is approached from the angle of how people use it rather than why. By shifting our attention to the strategic moves behind language, the memories that propel it, and the motivations that give it a certain visibility and social mobility, we can begin to understand the cultural and power relationships involved in the construction of language—that directly and indirectly influence people's living standard, life chances, and command over resources.

In what follows I use a symbolic interactionist approach, as well as cultural and historical sociology, to trace the development of the word *Nigger* as it has grown from a linguistic method of social control designed by White supremacists to regulate human behavior, to a distinctive Black radical tradition found mainly in working-class populations, to a word currently endorsed by popular culture—extensively used in public and educational spaces—as well as in the entertainment arena.[1]

The goal of this chapter is to illuminate the linguistic world that many urban youth travel on a daily basis. Not much is known about life "beneath the veil," as Du Bois (1899) termed it, and even less is known about the language urban youth use to sojourn in deteriorating public parks, increasingly militarized city streets, and sociopsychological dreamscapes produced by the formulaic music and narratives of rap.

Consequently, in trying to make sense of how discursive spaces help young urbanites identify and reconstitute themselves as social beings, it is important to look critically into sets of spaces where urban youth play, spend time, and just hang out (Kelley, 1997). This chapter does exactly that. Each scene examines a set of conversations involving the use of the word *Nigger* that occurred outside of school yet well within imagined or territorial community boundaries where youth develop, resist, try on, and re-create political and social identities.[2]

In order for this research to be representative, I conducted 60 interviews with African American, European American, Puerto Rican, and Asian American youth throughout the United States in places such as Philadelphia, Oakland, Berkeley, and New York.[3] The young men and women who have given their time to this project varied in terms of social background, education, regional history, and shade of skin; however, all shared one thing in common—they have either been called *Nigger/Nigga* or participated in calling other people *Nigger/Niggaz*. As a result, determining the social and political character of the N-word is essential, not only because the word is full of definitional ambiguity but also because language plays a critical role in the formation of individual and collective identities and, as a result, in one's personal politics.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: EXAMINING THE SHIFTING LINGUISTIC TERRAIN FROM *NIGGER* TO *NIGGA*

For the past five centuries or more, perhaps the most hotly contested word in the English language has been the racial and spatial designation of the term *Nigger* (Boyd, 1997). At its most degenerative level the term connotes the racial stratification and class hierarchy that have been defining characteristics of the English cultural landscape since its inception (Drake, 1987). In the United States, where race is an important calculus of social identity, the word *Nigger* reflects a particular way of looking at and interpreting human differences—both biophysical and cultural. Historically, as a way of imposing order and asserting dominance over others, Europeans used the word to transform their own social identities (irrespective of class), as well as to ascribe social inferiority to those populations encountered and exploited in the New World, Asia, and Africa. As a result, the word *Nigger* in the archives of the American historical imagination is not only a word but also an idea—an idea expressing the centrality of race and racial reasoning in American cultural politics, as well as the lingering legacy of slavery and the world emerging in its aftermath (Smedley, 1993).

The current debate over the word *Nigga*, as it relates to historical consciousness, has its roots in the Black power movement of the 1960s, shifts in the culture industry, and underground discourses on authenticity and the meaning of "Blackness." During the 1960s, when debates about the Black aesthetic were at an all-time high, it seemed unthinkable to certain segments of the Black community that a word like *Nigga* could be separated from the White supremacist boundaries responsible for bringing its linguistic cousin—*Nigger*—into existence in the first place. *Nigga*, for many Black folks of that era, not only was a derogatory term but also represented the old-fashioned notion that a Negro was expected to endure White insult, accommodate to oppressive working conditions, and accept comparatively poor treatment in wages, education, and housing (Brown, 1972). The word *Nigga*, for that generation, also signified an explicit rejection of the Black power ethos, which, according to social historian Harvard Sitkoff (1994), galvanized the civil rights movement and changed static notions of Black identity.

Not surprisingly then, the term *Nigga* for many Black folks who occupied the industrial ghettos of the 1960s and 1970s, was not viewed as the friendly appellation that it is in some communities today. Nor was the word used as a synonym for *Black* or as just another way to talk about Black cultural products without reference to skin color—which speaks to the way individuals from other ethnic groups have incorporated the word *Nigga* into their own cultural repertoire. On the contrary, *Nigga* for many Black urban residents of the past was a word that was to be tolerated, depending on the context of the situation, age and hue of the messenger, and tone and texture of the message being sent. Further still, *Nigga* for the two extremities in the Black spectrum—the conservative and the militant—was not a word that evoked any deep-rooted sense of community, common destiny, or collective understanding that there was indeed an authentic "Black" way of doing things (Brown, 1972). Rather, *Nigga*, regardless of spelling or enunciation, was a word with a particular recipe and a particular cook. In other words, *Nigga* was a term linked to the world of White supremacy and, as a result, laden with derogatory meaning.

The pleasure industry changed all that. It changed the way Black images were created, enhanced, distributed, and maintained within and outside of the Black community. It also magnified and narrowed the success narrative for many Black working-class youth by suggesting that the realm of sports and entertainment was probably the most realistic and economically viable option for a kid who was looking to avoid dead-end jobs and low-wage labor. Consequently, during a time when there were few employment opportunities for Blacks outside of the color-coded environment of ghetto communities, the White consumer market remained poised and eager to be entertained by the exotic Other. A classic example of this is the Black comedy of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, in particular that of Richard Pryor, Red Foxx, Flip Wilson, Moms Mabley, Dick Gregory, Steppin Fetchit, Nipsy Russell, and Eddie Murphy, to name a few. These comedians specialized in turning pain into profit by racializing and eroticizing Black bodies that historically had been sites of White exploitation and embodiments of the "darker side" of sexuality, criminality, and transgressiveness (a good example of this today would be Chris Rock) (Brown, 1972).

Black comedy—whether it was about sexual interludes, Black and White discrimination, or the hidden codes of public and private behavior—is a very complicated issue to think about in relation to the linguistic transformation of the terms *Nigger* and *Nigga*, especially when we consider that most Black comedy was not created or experienced in the pursuit of pleasure alone. Besides being about pleasure and expression, much of the Black comedy of the past three decades carried with it the potential to heal deep emotional scars, soothe the trials and tribulations associated with second-class citizenship, and push issues of power, expression, and aesthetic value into the forefront of American public and cultural consciousness (Kelley, 1998).

As a result, when we examine Black comedy, in relation to our argument about the shifting linguistic terrain of *Nigger* to *Nigga*, the commercialization of language as a form of creative, expressive, pleasurable,

and paid labor becomes paramount to the discussion. Because the truth of the matter is, whether you called it *capping, sounding, bagging, dissin'*, or *the dozens*, these discourses, offered mostly by Black male comedians, powerfully reproduced hierarchies of gender (often while deconstructing hierarchies of racial and class exploitation) in a profession where being able to get a laugh ultimately increased the value of man's sexuality while devaluing the sexual appeal of a woman (Kelley, 1998). And yet, even though Black comedy represents an important link between the commercialization of language and the changing meanings and practices of the word *Nigga* for African American youth, few Black urban residents of the past—who rarely owned, controlled, and distributed their own images—envisioned that in just a decade or two, *Nigga*, as word and concept, would be commercially appropriated by the culturel industry and thus deeply implicated in the burgeoning marketplace of creating a new Black cultural aesthetic mainly through a musical form called "rap."

THE ADVENT OF THE MODERN-DAY *NIGGA*

It is quite clear that, for many Black folks, the civil rights movement developed critical consciousness about the politics of race (hooks, 1990; Sitkoff, 1994). Passive consumption of images designed to promote and reinforce domination were challenged or replaced by the active production of images whose central emphasis was on decolonization. As a result, the advent of the modern day *Nigga* is fairly new to the African American lexicon and reflects a visible split between those forces that seek to call attention to the fluid, hybrid, and multinational aspects of Black cultural identity and those that maintain that the word *Nigga* romanticizes and reproduces race relations rooted in domination. According to social historian Robin Kelley (1994), the defining characteristic of the modern day *Nigga* is class as opposed to race:

> The construction of the ghetto as a Living nightmare and gangstas as products of that nightmare has given rise to what I call a new Ghettocentric identity in which the specific class, race, and gendered experiences in late capitalist urban centers coalesce to create a new identity—Nigga. (p. 210)

Kelley goes on to say that Niggaz link "their identity to the hood instead of simply skin color" (i.e., geography, socioeconomic status, and experience matter more than race/ethnicity) and that the use of the word *Nigga* acknowledges "the limitations of racial politics, including black middle class reformism as well as black nationalism" (p. 210). However, my research suggests that it is more complicated than this. For example, in interviews I conducted with Puerto Rican youth, many discussed using the term *Nigga* among themselves as well as with Blacks as a term of endearment. However, when asked specific questions about confrontations with law enforcement agencies or struggles over scarce community resources, many of my informants (Puerto Rican as well as African American) reverted back to the age-old "race rule" that you protect your own first and think about why later (Dyson, 1996). As a result, in order to truly investigate the relationship between "ghettocentric" identity and the use of the word *Nigga* by diverse populations, we must first understand the role that gangsta rap, the mass media, social scientists, and multiracial political and religious leaders have played in defining "Blackness" and exporting Black cultural images to the world outside of the ghetto.

Beginning with Du Bois' (1899) *Philadelphia Negro*, progressing with the "culture of poverty" of Oscar Lewis (1965), continuing through talk shows such as those of Rush Limbaugh or Howard Stern, and ending with descriptive lyrics of Ice Cube or Ice-T, problems of inner-city communities have been disproportionately identified as the pathological problems of poor urban residents. Even as interpretations and opinions have differed, the adjectives used to describe Black urban physical, cultural, and social space have remained the same—culturally *defective, nihilistic,* and *dysfunctional*. These terms suggest that the causes of racial inequity and poverty are to be found not in economic decline or inefficient government structures but rather in the pathologies and cultural values of inner-city residents themselves.

Unfortunately, very little of the cultural production and monologues produced by sociologists, cultural critics, social commentators, and rap singers provide an adequate understanding of the richness and textured variety of people's lives and cultures in inner-city neighborhoods. Much of the problem can be attributed to the fact that rarely do the residents speak for themselves. Consequently, what cultural forms mean from the standpoint of the practitioner is largely ignored in social science research. My purpose, then, is to offer some observations as to why some Black (and non-Black) working-class youth have chosen to adopt a nuanced version of the word *Nigger* as an intricate part of their cultural identity. In order to accomplish this task, it will be important to examine several different cultural venues where the word has come to prominence—including the basketball court, the barbershop, and rap music, as both physical and/or cultural spaces and as places central to the construction of young people's social identity.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT

The first scene of this ethnography opens at a basketball court in South Philadelphia. My involvement at this court is one of both participant and observer. What I am participating in, to an outsider, may appear to be just a simple game of basketball. However, what I am observing is that basketball in my neighborhood is not only a platform for cultural expression, stylistic innovation, and racial, gender, and class construction; less formally speaking, especially from the standpoint of the practitioners, the court is simply a leisure spot, a place of play, a community space, a place to build (or destroy) an opponent's self-esteem and work ethic amid the abandoned buildings, concrete walls, and disembodied dreams that characterize the modern-day ghetto.

Each time a player steps onto the court, the game itself generates enormous kinds of possibilities, while at the same time imposing different sorts of limitations. One of the most obvious limitations is the language of the game—the way Black males (of all classes who play the game) talk to, about, and around each other. Some call it "trash talkin'," others call it "talkin' shit," still others call it "talkin' head" or just plain "smack." Whatever you want to call it, it is clear that the policing of boundaries on the basketball court, the competition to see "who got game and who don't," and the construction of masculinity for young boys and men is expressed as much through the language of the game as the game itself. In other words, language is a place of struggle on the basketball court—a place to fence in, hold down, bind in, and check your opponent, as well as a place to recover, renew, and refine lost or undiscovered parts or yourself.

Dante is a 17-year-old Black male whom I have seen and talked with before on and off the court. When I approach, he first comments on my shoes.

D: Yo Nigga . . . where'd u get them shoes?
AA: Wha-chu talkin' about man (*as I look down*) . . . these are the shoes I always be wearin'.
D: I know, Nigga . . . that's the point . . . why don't you spend the cold hard cash . . . and get yourself some real sneaks . . . made out of real leather and shit?
(*The fellas on the sidelines start laughin' and Fella 1 jumps in*)
Fella 1: Dem new Iverson's boy . . . Dem shits is tight . . . I'd drop dime on them if . . . (*I interrupt him*)
AA: Muthafucka . . . whether I be wearin' Converse All stars . . . or the Muthafuckin' new Jordans . . . I still got enough game to dunk on your sorry ass. [I'm talking to Dante.]

D: Nigga please . . . you ain't never dunked on me. . . . Maybe you schoolin them college niggaz . . . but here Nigga . . . this is my hood . . . and my court.
AA: Who got next anyway?
D: I do Nigga . . . you want to run?
AA: Yeah . . .
D: What about him? Who he?
AA: That's my boy . . . he cool
D: Do he got game?
AA: Why don't you ask him?
D: Where you from?
Friend: Iowa.
D: Damn I didn't know there were Niggaz in Iowa.
(*The fellas on the sidelines start laughin'*)
Friend: Yeah, there are a few of us running around up there.
Fella 2: Nigga even sound like he from Iowa.
D: Hey yo . . . [Dante's talking to me] . . . I only got room for you . . .
AA: Why you dissin' my boy like that?
D: Nigga . . . I ain't dissin' him. . . . The Nigga just sound like he from Iowa . . .
Fella 2: Nigga probably play like it too . . .
D: Shit . . . I'm tryin' to hold the court all day . . . last week we got our asses kicked by them hollywood Niggaz . . .
AA: Whatever man. . . . I'll wait and run with my boy . . . Yo. . . . We got next . . .

Like most racialized minority youth who negotiate the demilitarize space of the ghetto, marked by chainlink fences, garbage-strewn street bent and rusted basketball rims, and graffiti-filled walls (and I mean ba graffiti, not good graffiti), Dante's use of the word *Nigga* does not nece: sarily signal immaturity, false consciousness, or some form of linguist rebellion. Rather, if we are to understand his use of the word *Nigga* a simultaneously more and less than a mere pronouncement of exploit tion, victimization, stigmatization, and racism, then we must ask: Why do Black communication work? And how and why does it fail? These que: tion suggest that we should consider the nuances involved in Black intra cultural communication.

Black intracultural differences have largely been ignored in education and social science research. One reason for this is that cultural differenc play a covert role in the communication process. When Black folks fro different social backgrounds, educational levels, and regions of the cou try interact in public space, there is generally little or no discussion abo

the ways in which they are interpreting one another's behavior, the reasons they are interpreting it as they do, or the way they are expecting the interaction to evolve (Heath, 1983; Kochman, 1981).

As a result, Blacks often assume that they are operating according to identical speech and cultural conventions that were formed in opposition to, or in accordance with, standards that the socially dominant White group has established for itself (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1991). This assumption speaks to the general public failure to recognize the notion of a core Black culture—which, according to social historian Robin Kelley (1997), "incorporates a diverse and contradictory range of practices, attitudes, and relationships that are dynamic, historically situated, and ethnically hybrid" (p. 27).

While Kelley's definition of a core Black culture may be viewed by some as oxymoronic—essentialist because it suggests that there is a core Black culture, yet anti-essentialist because the core Black culture it suggests is composed of diverse and contradictory elements—it does speak to the ways in which class mobility has altered the collective Black experience so that racism no longer has the same impact on all of our lives that it once did (hooks, 1990; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Add to this generational, intercultural, and gender specificity, and one begins to understand that a great deal of what the word *Nigga* means, how it is received, and its social conventions have to do with the social spaces that one occupies when using the word—be it work, leisure, or community—and one's position vis-à-vis existing racial and class hierarchies.

As a result, in the case above, Dante and the other ballplayers made the fallacious assumption that there were "no Niggaz in Iowa." Furthermore, they assumed that even if there were Niggaz in Iowa, the few there don't know how to play basketball. Assertions such as these, which seek to confine Black folks to a universal, homogenized, and singular notion of Black identity, fail to capture the complex and variegated experience of Black people's everyday lives. This process of social excommunication extends far beyond the basketball court and serves to promote the notion of an "authentic" Black experience by identifying as unnatural those expressions of Black life that do not conform to preexisting patterns or stereotypes (hooks, 1990).

The Power of the Blade

Historically, the barbershop in the Black community has performed a function very similar to that of the Black church; that is, it has been a place of belonging and togetherness (Anderson, 1999). A place where people who were collectively experiencing racism in similar ways could come together

and feel a stronger sense of group solidarity. A place to rebuild communal feelings and acknowledge each other in daily life. A place to undo years of racist teachings that had denied Black folks the power to recognize themselves. The looks and conversations in the barbershop were affirmations of our struggle, our Blackness, our wounded spirits, and the alienation that was dehumanizing us. Another important practice in the barbershop was that of sharing stories, family gossip, and facts about African-American life.

Today, the conversations in the barbershop have changed a great deal. As overt racial discrimination and violence have diminished—and more Blacks have been incorporated into the mainstream—the Black imagination has been commodified as never before. At this historical moment Black folks are divided. Many of us do not live in Black neighborhoods, and most of us work for White people. Large numbers of us are socialized and educated in historically White institutions or through a historically White controlled mass media (hooks, 1990). Interracial relations are on the rise, and looking back we can see that the racial solidarity born of the 1960s and 1970s will be very different from the racial solidarity that may (or may not) emerge in the twenty-first century. As a result, people young and old must rearticulate the basis for collective bonding.

Accordingly, this scene opens up at a barbershop in Oakland. Two men (one in his mid to late 30s, the other well over 40) and two boys (juniors and seniors in high school) are in chairs getting their hair cut. The conversation on this day is about the situation of being a Black man in America.

Barber 1: So how was your day today, Leonard?
30-yr-old: Rough day today, Mr. Jones . . . I mean . . . being a Black man in America sure is hard . . . I mean . . . White people think you're acting paranoid when you tell them about it. . . . But I'd like to see them try to live in a Black man's skin just one time . . . I mean just one time . . . and see how they like it . . .
Barber 1: I know . . . the White mans got the badge, the power, the law . . .
High school student 1: The money . . .
Barber 1: So anyway you look at it the Black man loses . . .
30-yr-old: That's what I'm talkin' about. . . . Unless you're a celebrity . . .
40-yr-old: It don't matter if you're a celebrity . . . even movie stars and athletes get harassed by the cops. . . . I can't remember exactly where I was . . . but I saw this boy who plays for the Raiders [football team] get completely disrespected by the cops. . . . And he kept saying . . . do you know who I am . . . do you know who I am . . . and they were like . . . Yeah, we know who you are. . . . We know who you are . . . and these were Black cops, too . . .
High school student 1: Who was he?

40-yr-old: I don't remember.
High school student 1: Was he doin' anything wrong?
40-yr-old: He wasn't doin' a damn thing wrong . . . I remember that.
High school student 2: That's right . . . it don't matter what you do if you're Black . . . because Black cops are *Niggers*, too.
Barber 2: That's true, *Nigga* . . . that's true . . . Black cops will make a spectacle out of you . . . if you don't "yessem" and "noem" to death . . . Sell-outs, man . . . they're nothin' but sell-outs.
30-yr-old: I disagree. . . . White cops are much worse than Black cops. . . . Man, I remember this time when a White cop stopped me for some bullshit . . . and I was in the middle of nowhere . . . And the cop was like . . . *Nigger* . . . I'll put a bullet in your ass if you don't do exactly what I say. . . . And that shit was crazy . . . 'cause I was out in the middle of nowhere.
Barber 1: And you did exactly what he said, didn't you?
30-yr-old: Sure as hell did.
Barber 3: I hear cops make good money though.
40-yr-old: Yeah, they do.
Barber 1: And we need some good cops in Oakland . . . the police force here smells like turpentine.
30-yr-old: Taste like it, too . . . [the conversation sort of dies out after this].

The criminalization, surveillance, and incarceration of Black men and young adults in the heart of Oakland speaks to the larger social issue of disproportionately placing more Black men, especially poor Black men, in prison or on probation than any other group in relation to the proportion of the total population. For the men in the barbershop, and Black urban youth in general, the police are a major part of an oppressive criminal justice system, which in 1995 placed 24% of Black males between the ages of 20 and 29 behind bars or on parole. As a result, in the streets of Oakland as well as in other cities across the United States, calling cops "Niggers" or "Nigga killaz" is one way Black urban youth challenge the status quo and attempt to move police brutality into the discursive arena. As Foucault (1977) explains, "when prisoners began to speak, they possessed an individual theory of prisons, the penal system, and justice. It's this form of discourse which ultimately matters, a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents—and not a theory about delinquency" (p. 209).

Most Black urban youth, like the high school student 2 in the scene above, use *Nigger* as a word-weapon of choice, not only to name the oppressor but, perhaps more significantly, to name the oppression. Thus, regardless of the color of the perpetrator, *Nigger* in this context is meant to

suggest that the experiences of inner-city Black men are not universal to all Black people and, further, that some African Americans play a key role in perpetuating intraracial oppression (Drake, 1987). In other words, "Niggers" as well as "Niggaz" are not only victims but also agents of racial and class oppression (Kelley, 1994).

"Niggers," according to the men and young boys in the barbershop, perpetuate racial and class oppression by concerning themselves with racism solely to the extent that it limits their upward social mobility. This sort of analysis is aimed particularly at the Black cops who harassed the football player. That is, the Black cops were "Niggers" because they lacked a complete understanding of the link among racism, poverty, unemployment, youth culture, and police repression—as it relates to overcrowded, poorly funded schools, urban decay, the growth of privatized public spaces at the expense and exclusion of young Blacks and Latinos, and the erosion of youth programs and recreational facilities. Consequently, the Black cops, whether they were conscious of it or not, ended up reproducing racial stratification by equating Black skin and youth culture with the categorical meanings of crime and delinquency. hooks (1991) explains it like this: "Work is not necessarily oppositional because it is created by a black person" (p. 8).

Equally revealing is how the Niggaz in the barbershop (here I am referring to barber 2 and the two high school students as *Niggaz* because of their relatively youthful age) did not realize how they, too, were perpetuating racial and class divisions: first, by socially labeling individuals in the Black middle class as assimilationists, "tokens," or "sell-outs," and, second, according to psychoanalytic anthropologist Signithia Fordham (1996), by mockingly addressing those affiliated with predominantly White institutions as "not Black enough" or labeling those educated in institutions of higher learning as "not Black-identified" (Fordham, p. 14).

In concluding this section, it is important to remember that there is a visible split within the Black community between those forces who call themselves integrationists and those forces who consider themselves self-deterministic (Brown, 1972; Cayton & Drake, 1944; hooks, 1990). However, even this simplistic dichotomy is filled with gaps and fissures, precisely because there are many Black folks who fit into neither category or into both at the same time. Add to this how the corporate imagination undermines not only Black solidarity but also various other forms of solidarity by promoting personal choice and individual rights, "in a way which suggests 'freedom' for a Black person can be measured by the degree to which we can base all decisions in life on individualistic concerns, what feels good or satisfies desire" (hooks 1990, p. 37; see also Gregory, 1992).[4] And it becomes clear how the culture industry provides not only information or entertainment but also "'pockets of consciousness'—frameworks

for interpreting and reacting to social and political reality" (Hallin, 1986, p. 22). In the next section I examine the pocket of consciousness where the word *Nigga* is most commonly used in the public sphere today, that is, in the world of gangsta rap.

Music as Space

Rap and hip-hop are the common literacy of urban and suburban youth today. The aesthetics, style, and sonic pleasure of the cultural form cuts across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. However, while studies of rap and hip hop have been useful in terms of recognizing the critical voice of contemporary Black urban youth, they have done little to advance our understanding of the role gangsta rap plays in extending *Nigga* into the realm of popular culture (George, 1998). As a result, in this scene I talk to urban youth about the use of the word *Nigga* as it relates to gangsta rap. In this first account, Tanya, a Puerto Rican high school student, discusses hypersexuality, violence, and power issues as they relate to gangsta rap:

T: To me, what I love about rap and hip-hop is the videos . . . I love them Niggaz with them nice clothes, cars, and shit. . . . They be drivin' around lookin' all fly. . . . Me and my Niggaz watch that shit all the time. . . . Dem Niggaz is hard . . . and fine too . . .
AA: Who do you watch the videos with?
T: My girlfriends.
AA: Black or Puerto Rican?
T: Puerto Rican, man. . . . But I'll tell you one thing I don't like . . . I'm not sure I like those little kids tryin' to act like gangstaz. . . . Now that really bothers me . . .
AA: What do you mean?
T: I mean . . . I don't like little kids feeling on each other and shit. . . . tryin' to look all hard . . . bumpin' and grindin' . . . that's too much for me. . . . But dem other Niggaz . . . they like it . . .
AA: Who do you mean . . . them other Niggaz?
T: I'm talkin' about my friends and my brothers . . . especially my brothers . . . they don't care . . . all they care about is cars, pussy, and ass . . .

Wayne, a 24-year-old Vietnamese male, had this narrative to offer.

W: Man, I used to use the word *Nigga* all the time . . . I mean I'm a DJ and that's how those of us in the rap game used to talk to each other. . . . You kno' . . . Nigga please . . . or Nigga, fuck you . . . or who the fuck does this Nigga think he is. . . . You kno' how it is . . . You kno' how it is . . .
AA: And do you think gangsta rap had anything to do with how y'all talke to one another?
W: With what?
AA: With y'all calling each other *Nigga*?
W: I don't know man . . . I've never thought about it like that before. . . . *Nigga* is just a word that we all used to say "wassup" to each oth . . . I mean, there's no harm in it . . . but I never thought about it mu before you started to ask me all these questions . . .
AA: OK . . . well, let me ask you one more question . . .
W: Shoot.
AA: Why don't you use the word anymore?
W: I don't know . . . I guess I've just out grown it . . .

Jim, a 17-year-old White male, added this:

J: When I'm around my close close friends . . . I say Nigga all the time . . . and when I'm listening to my music . . . I can't help but say Nigga. . . . I on the street . . . around people I don't know . . . I never use the wor . . . too political, man . . . too political. . . . Using *Nigga* the wrong way i a good way to get your ass kicked around here [Berkeley] . . . and I ai tryin' to start nothin' like that . . . that's not my style . . .

The reconfiguration of Black identity through the medium of rap dicates that generational shifts have rearranged established boundar between the old image of "Nigger" and "new jacks" who may, or may n be Black in color, culture, or consciousness but still identify with the c temporary usage of the term *Nigga*. Those who make up this new gene tion have been raised during a time when overt racial discrimination the form of Jim Crow laws or separate facilities has been outlawed, allo ing more access to institutional resources and privileges than previ generations had. As a result, this new generation has the added adv tage of being as Black as they want to be and still occupying a signific position in the cultural marketplace. A good example of this can be fou in the lyrics of Ice T and Ice Cube:

> I'm a nigger, not a colored man or a black
> or a Negro or an Afro-American—I'm all that
> Yes I was born in America too.
> But does South Central look like America to you?
> —Ice T, "Straight Up Nigga"

> Niggaz always gotta show they teeth
> Now I'mo be brief
> Be true to the game
> —Ice Cube, "True to the Game"

Discourses such as these demonstrate that in today's cultural marketplace one can be both "true to the game"—that is, true to their own cultural identity—while at the same time having a great deal of crossover appeal. However, it is also important to note that as cultural identity becomes a marketable commodity, easily projected into mainstream society, it loses some of its sociopolitical impact. For example, Ice Cube and Ice T are certainly not the threatening phenomena today that they were when they first burst on to the cultural scene. Todd Boyd (1997) describes the fluid nature and political complexity of cultural boundaries:

> It is interesting how one audience can perceive this move to the mainstream as becoming part of the establishment, while another sees it as a threat toward losing power. Thus it is not uncommon to find individuals who are criticized by mainstream audiences as being "too Black," or at least pushing a Black agenda, and at the same time criticized by another Black audience as having sold out. (p. 29)

Like Boyd, I found in my own research with young people that audience perception of the word *Nigga* oscillates with respect to race, class, geography, and age differentiation. It seemed that young people of different races and classes seemed to be comfortable with using the word *Nigga*, or even being called the word *Nigga*, depending on individual musical taste, neighborhood context and social background, social networks, and degree of interest in those spaces within the culture industry where the word *Nigga* is most often used.

As a result, I concluded that social environment was a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in being able to negotiate the shifting linguistic terrain of *Nigger* and *Nigga*. I say necessary, but not sufficient, because there were individuals such as Darnice in Philadelphia, who attended a segregated high school, who stated very clearly that "I just don't like the word *Nigger* or *Nigga* . . . I don't like the way it sounds . . . or the way it makes me feel. . . . Plus my momma told me I shouldn't talk like that anyway. . . . She says it's backwards actin' . . ."

CONCLUSION

These scenes, taken together, suggest that the word *Nigga* is still a contentious term in the lexicon of American popular culture. Though it is considered improper in formal public conversation, and *African American* see to be the politically correct choice, the word still obviously holds a gr deal of currency in the private sector and increasingly so in much of t public sector (Boyd, 1997).

Finally, proper terms of identification change as society changes. Sh ing linguistic terms, such as *colored, Negro,* and, most recently, *Black,* c be linked to changes in the cultural industry, the economy, grassro movements, individuals' daily struggles, and legal apparatuses that se to classify and perpetuate popular beliefs about human difference. Ad tionally, the persistence of the word should be a reminder of youth's c during ability to map its own cultural terrain. In *Freedom Charter,* a w which captures the historical struggles and strategies of the resistar movement in South Africa, the phrase "our struggle is also a struggle memory against forgetting" is continually repeated (hooks, 1990, p. 4 In many ways this captures the complexity and confusing lines of dem cation involved in using the words *Nigger* or *Nigga*. To use them, or e to hear them, given their tumultuous history, is truly a struggle of mem against forgetting.

NOTES

1. In the tradition of symbolic interactionism, I adhere to Blumer's (19 classic three premises of symbolic interaction: that we know things by their me ings, that meanings are created through social interaction, and that meani change through interaction.

2. The three discursive spaces analyzed in this chapter are the basket court, the barbershop, and rap music. These discursive spaces were selected cause they represent key sources of identity and security for individuals as as groups of youth and, consequently, are important locations in which to ness the dialectical interplay among experience, perception, and imaginatio they relate to the shaping and reshaping of young people's identities, the cla ing and reclaiming of public spaces, and the political contradictions involved w language is delivered as social critique.

3. The interviews, as well as the participant observation in this report, w collected through a comparative urban ethnography project of the Universit Pennsylvania and the University of California at Berkeley. The Coca Cola pro (University of Pennsylvania) and the Diversity Project (University of Califo at Berkeley) are linked through my dissertation, examining factors that cont ute to disparities in academic achievement, as well as factors responsible for racial separation of students within and outside of school. Both projects w started in the summer of 1996.

4. By various forms of solidarity I am referring to racial, ethnic, religi and gendered forms of solidarity. And by *undermine* I am referring to the ero

of collective solidarity. For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which the corporate imagination erodes various forms of solidarity, see hooks (1990).

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