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"Check the Technique: Black Urban Culture and the Predicament of Social Science"

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"CHECK THE TECHNIQUE":

BLACK URBAN CULTURE AND THE PREDICAMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

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[WARNING!!!! EXTREMELY ROUGH DRAFT!!! HANDLE WITH CARE, AND PLEASE DON'T CITE WITHOUT ASKING ME FIRST]

Perhaps the supreme irony of black American existence is how broadly black people debate the question of cultural identity among themselves while getting branded as a cultural monolith by those who would deny us the complexity and *complexion* of a community, let alone a nation. If Afro-Americans have never settled for the racist reductions imposed upon them--from chattel slaves to cinematic stereotype to sociological myth--it's because the black collective conscious not only knew better but also knew more than enough ethnic diversity to subsume these fictions.

--Greg Tate[1]

The biggest difference between us and white folks is that we *know* when we are playing.

--Alberta Roberts[2]

Once again, black urban culture--or what is believed to be black urban culture--has taken center stage. Much like the late 1960's and early 1970's, publishers are offering huge advances for anything on the "real" situation in the ghettoes, filmmakers are searching out the crummiest locations so that they may better capture inner city pathos, the New York Times is running front page articles on why young black folk call each other "Nigga." Black politicos and a rainbow of progressives debate whether contemporary black youth culture will prove to be the downfall of the community or the beginnings of a new revolution--with the proper guidance, of course. Meanwhile, almost every young white person I run into nowadays is trying desperately to dress, speak, and walk like the ghetto youths who live in their TV sets or on the pages of Vibe, The Source or Rolling Stone magazines.

Keeping in the tradition beginning with Robert Park and his proteges to the War on Poverty-inspired ethnographers, academics have once again stepped forward and significantly shaped, and in some cases defined, the current dialogue on black urban culture. Conferences, new courses, and new faculty positions abound, and there seems to be no shortage of student interest in the subject. Although some of this work is being done under the auspices of cultural studies or other humanities-based projects, scholarly discourse on contemporary black urban culture was/is/and probably will be dominated by social scientists. In some respects, the central role that social science

plays in shaping popular conceptions of "ghetto life" is also reminiscent of the research done in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists compete for huge grants from Ford, Rockefeller, Sage, and other foundations to measure everything measurable in order to get a handle on the newest internal threat to civilization. Even the increasingly dangerous art of urban ethnography is making a come back in the U.S. With the discovery (or invention?) of the so-called underclass, terms like "nihilistic," "dysfunctional," and "pathological" have become the most common adjectives to describe contemporary black urban culture.

Unfortunately, the mountain of books and articles being published every year on the crisis of the so-called "underclass" offer us less complexity about people's lives and cultures than a bad blaxploitation film or an Ernie Barnes painting. Many social scientists are not only quick to generalize about the black urban poor on the basis of a few "representative" examples, but more often than not, they don't let the natives speak. A major part of the problem is the way in which the culture concept is employed by most mainstream social scientists studying urban poverty and the underclass. Indeed, much of what has been called "culture" by conservatives (and some liberals) isn't culture at all but often situational responses that cannot be generalized to an entire population. Relying on a narrowly conceived social science definition of culture, most of the underclass literature use "behavior" and "culture" interchangeably.

My purpose, then, is to offer some reflections on how the culture concept employed by social scientists studying the black urban poor has severely impoverished contemporary debates over the plight of African-American urban culture. Much of this literature not only conflates behavior with culture, but when "expressive" cultural forms or what has been called "popular culture" fall under the purview of social scientists (e.g., language, music, style, etc.), it is roughly reduced to either

pathological products of victimization or creative "coping mechanisms" to deal with racism and poverty. What most conservative, liberal, and even leftist interpreters of the "underclass" have in common is a presumption that their subjects are pliant victims of ghetto life whose every act is a response to their environment. Despite all the differences, nuances, and debates among social scientists, most of the literature consistently ignores what these cultural forms mean for the practitioners. None of these scholars acknowledge that what might be at stake here is aesthetics, style, visceral pleasures that have little to do with racism, poverty, and oppression. Nor do they recognize black urban culture's hybridity and internal differences. Given the almost axiomatic belief that inner city communities are more isolated than ever before and have completely alien values, the notion that there is one, discrete, identifiable black urban culture carries a great deal of weight. By conceiving black urban culture in the singular, interpreters of the urban poor reduce their subjects to cardboard typologies who fit neatly into their own definition of the "underclass" and render invisible a wide array of complex cultural forms and practices.

BEHAVIOR VS. CULTURE: THE INVENTION OF THE UNDERCLASS

A few years ago Mercer Sullivan decried the disappearance of "culture" from the study of urban poverty, attributing its demise to the fact that "overly vague notions of the culture of poverty brought disrepute to the culture concept as a tool for understanding the effects of the concentration of poverty among cultural minorities."[3] In some respects, Sullivan is right: the conservatives who maintain that persistent poverty in the inner city is the result of the behavior of the poor, the product of some culture deficiency, has garnered so much opposition from many liberals and radicals that few scholars are willing to venture any sort of cultural explanation. Instead, opponents of the "culture of poverty" idea tend to focus on structural transformations in

the U.S. economy, labor force composition, and resultant changes in marriage patterns to explain the emergence of the underclass.[4]

However, when looked at from another perspective, I concur with Michael Katz that culture never really disappeared from the underclass debate.[5] On the contrary, it has been as central to the work of liberal structuralists and radical Marxists as it has been to the conservative culturalists. While culturalists insist that the behavior of the urban poor explains their poverty, the structuralists argue that the economy explains their behavior as well as their poverty. For all their differences, there is general agreement that a common, debased culture is what defines the "underclass," what makes it a threat to the future of America. The urban underclass is a loosely defined "class" of people (almost always *black*) who reside in impoverished inner city communities and share a common culture. "Culture," defined this way, is a set of "behaviors" that can be summarized as follows: the underclass is welfare dependent, have "dysfunctional" families, exhibit a whole range of pathologies, take and sell illicit drugs, steal from and kill one another, have no skills whatsoever and no desire to do an honest day's work. Young people, in particular, are the biggest problem. They are nihilistic kids concerned only with "getting paid" and proving their manhood or womanhood by having babies and "spraying" anyone who jumps bad.[6]

I realize that this is an oversimplified cariacture of a voluminous body of work, but it captures the more common typologies used to describe/define the underclass. While all of these authors differ and debate among themselves, there is general agreement that everyone who lives in economically depressed neighborhoods share a common set of behaviors. Indeed, serious scholars who are all too aware of the dangers of overgeneralization justify the existence of an underclass by searching for tiny subcommunities (i.e., the frequently studied Cabrini Green or North Lawndale projects in Chicago) where many of the behaviorial characteristics of *their* image of the "underclass" can be found. When such a community cannot be easily located and

identified, they search out specific families or groups of children as "representative" case studies.[7]

For many of these authors, behavior is not only a synonym for culture but is also used as the deteriminant for class. In simple terms, what makes the "underclass" a class is their common behavior--not their income, the poverty level, or the kind of work they do. It is definition of class driven more by moral panic than systematic analysis. A cursory look at the literature reveals that there is no consensus as to precisely what behaviors define the underclass. Some scholars, like William Julius Wilson, have offered a more spatial definition of the underclass by focusing on areas of "concentrated poverty," but obvious problems result when observers discover the wide range of behavior and attitudes in, say, a single city block. What happens to the concept when we find people with jobs engaging in illicit activities and some unemployed depending on church charity? Or married employed fathers who spend virtually no time with their kids and jobless unwed fathers participating and sharing in childcare responsibilities? How does the concept of underclass behavior hold up to Kathryn Edin's findings that many so-called "welfare dependent" women must also work for wages in order to make ends meet?[8] More importantly, how do we fit criminals (many first time offenders), welfare recipients, single mothers, absent fathers, alcohol and drug abusers, and gun-toting youth all into one "class"?

Clearly, race has something to do with it. *Numerically*, more whites than African-Americans fall into practically all of these categories (and in terms of drug and alcohol abuse, the percentages for whites are higher), but no matter how many times this is said, the image of the underclass shall continue to be black. But race aside, rigorous social science should resist treating "behavior" as the basis for a class of people. When we try to apply the same principles to people with higher incomes whom are presumed to be "functional" and "normative," we ultimately expose the absurdity of it all. For example, social philosopher Leonard Harris challenges us to

imagine what we would come up with if we used the same indices to study the "urban rich": "Suppose that their behavior was unduly helpful to themselves; say they rarely married, had more one-child families, were more likely than previous rich to be sexual libertines practicing safe sex, were health conscious, and were shrewd investors in corporate and ghetto property without moral reflection."[9] Likewise, political scientist Charles Henry offers the following description of pathological behavior for the very folks the underclass are supposed to emulate. This tangle of deviant behavior, which he calls the "culture of wealth," is characterized by a "rejection or denial of physical attributes" leading to "hazardous sessions in tanning parlors" and frequent trips to weight-loss salons; rootlessness, antisocial behavior, and "an inability to make practical decisions" evident by their tendency to own several homes, frequent private social and dining clubs, and by their vast amount of unneccessary and socially useless possessions. "Finally," Henry adds, "the culture of the rich is engulfed in a web of crime, sexism, and poor health. Drug use and white collar crime are rampant, according to every available index. Family stucture invariably follows an outdated patriarchal model similar to the old "Ozzie and Harriet" or "Leave it to Beaver" television shows. Aside from weight problems, many of the rich are workaholics and suffer from an inability to relax. . . . In sum, this group is engaged in a permanent cycle of divorce, forced child separations through boarding schools, and rampant materialism that leads to the dreaded Monte Carlo syndrome. Before they can be helped they must close tax loopholes, end subsidies, and stop buying influence."[10] Harris and Henry are not merely lampooning the underclass literature. They are raising difficult yet obvious questions about how deviance is constructed and how race, class, and power shape academic and popular discourse of deviance.

For all the intense debates between liberals and conservatives over how to solve the problems of the urban poor, most social scientists agree that what distinguishes the underclass from the rest of "us" is behavior/culture. Scholars and critics, from

conservatives like Lawrence Mead, liberals like William J. Wilson and Elijah Anderson, and leftists like Cornel West, incessantly point to a "golden age" of good behavior, when the young respected their elders, worked hard, did not live their lives for leisure, took education seriously, and respected their neighbor's property.[11] But this has been the claim of every generation of black intellectuals and self-appointed leaders since the end of Reconstruction. In 1914, W.E.B. DuBois and Augustus Dill surveyed several hundred leading African-Americans across the country about the state of "manners and morals" in black communities, particularly among young people. The responses are strikingly similar to our contemporary moral panic:

> Many parents allow their children to fun at large at late hours of the night. They assemble in dives and hang around the corners in great numbers, especially the boys. Many of them are becoming gamblers and idlers.
> . . . .
>
> I don't think that parents are quite as strict with their children as they were when I was a child.
> . . . .
>
> There is probably no effort among any of them to prevent or hinder rapid increase of children. There is much parental negligence and many of the children do not receive the proper home attention.
> . . . .
>
> The teachers and preachers need to thunder forth a change. There is too much laxity, children are not taught to obey their parents and superiors as they should; they are allowed to go and come too much at will without reporting to superiors; to visit pool rooms, saloons, dances and places of cheap notoriety.
> . . . .
>
> Movies, I believe, have an unwholesome effect upon the young people. Roller skating, rag-time music, cabaret songs, and ugly suggestions of the big city are all pernicious. The dancing clubs in the big cities are also vicious.[12]

In short, black urban youth were in crisis over eight decades ago due to incompetent parenting, the character traits of the "lower class," alcohol, and their participation in a decadent popular culture. If these young people were products of a nihilistic, decadent, narcissistic culture which left them devoid of survival and parenting skills, where art thou golden age?

"IT'S JUST A GHETTO THANG": THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY

In the mid to late 1960's, a group of progressive social scientists, mostly ethnographers unconcerned with whether there ever was a golden age, challenged the idea that African-American urban culture hindered their advancement. Instead, they insisted that black culture was itself a necessary adaptation to racism and poverty, a set of coping mechanisms that grew out of the struggle for material and psychic survival.[13] Ironically, while this work consciously challenged culture of poverty theories and sought to recast ghetto dwellers as active agents rather than passive victims, it has nonetheless reinforced monolithic interpretations of black urban culture and significantly shaped current articulations of the culture concept in poverty studies.

With the zeal of colonial missionaries, these liberal and often radical ethnographers (mostly white men) set out to explore the newly discovered concrete jungles. Inspired by the politics of the 1960's and mandated by Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, a veritable army of anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, and social psychologists set up camp in America's ghettoes. Indeed, so many social scientists roamed the streets of Harlem when I was a child in the late 1960's and early 1970's that some of our neighbors developed pat answers to their questionnaires and interviews. Even our liberal white teachers committed to turning us into functional members of society turned out to be foot soldiers in the new ethnographic army. With the overnight success of published collections of inner city children's writings like The Me Nobody Knows and Caroline Mirthes Can't You Hear Me Talking to You?, writing about the intimate details of our home life seemed like our most important assignment. (And we made the most of it by enriching our mundane narratives with stories from "Mod Squad," "Hawaii Five-O," and "Speed Racer.")

Of course, I don't believe for a minute that most of our teachers gave us these kinds of exercises hoping to one day appear on the Merv Griffin Show. But, in

retrospect at least, the explosion of interest in the inner city cannot be easily divorced from the marketplace. Although they came to mine what they believed was *the* "authentic Negro culture," there was real gold in them thar ghettoes since white America's fascination with the pathological urban poor translated into massive book sales. (It was not entirely a one-way street, however. As young kids we regarded these young interlopers, with their fake street argot and startling ignorance, as a source of income, especially since most kept their pockets full of quarters and some paid informants as much as three or four bucks.)

Unfortunately, most social scientists believed they knew what "authentic Negro culture" was before they entered the field. The "real Negroes" (or as the rap group NWA might say, "real niggaz") were the young jobless men hanging out on the corner passing the bottle, the brothers with the nastiest verbal repetoire, the pimps and hustlers, and the single mothers who raised streetwise kids who began cursing before they could walk.[14] Of course, there were other characters, like the men and women who went to work everyday in factories, foundries, hospitals, nursing homes, private homes, police stations, sanitation departments, banks, garment factories, assembly plants, pawn shops, construction sites, loading docks, telephone companies, grocery and department stores, public transit, resturaunts, welfare offices, recreation centers; or the street vendors, the cab drivers, the bus drivers, the ice cream truck drivers, the folks who protected or cleaned downtown buildings all night long. These are the kinds of people who lived in my neighborhood in West Harlem during the early 1970's, but they rarely found their way into the ethnographic text. And when they did show up, social scientists tended to reduce them to typologies--"lames," "strivers," "mainstreamers," "achievers," "revolutionaries," etc.[15]

Perhaps these urban dwellers were not as interesting, or more likely, they stood at the margins of a perceived or invented "authentic" Negro society. A noteworthy exception is John Langston Gwaltney's remarkable book, Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of

Black America (1981). Based on interviews with black working-class residents in several Northeastern cities conducted during the 1970's, Drylongso is one of the few works on urban African-Americans by an African-American anthropologist to emerge during the height of ghetto ethnography. Gwaltney breaks with most of his colleagues, whose method consisted primarily of observation and interepretation.[16] Because he is blind, such a method was impossible. Instead--and this is the book's strength--he allows his informants to speak for themselves about what *they* see and do. They interpret their own communities, African-American culture, white society, racism, politics and the state, and the very discipline in which Gwaltney was trained--anthropology. As one of his informants put it, "I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger." What the book reveals is that the natives know what the anthropologists are saying and writing about them, and they saw in Gwaltney--who relied primarily on family and friends as informants--an opportunity to speak back. One, a woman he calls Elva Noble, said to him: "I'm not trying to tell you your job, but if you ever do write a book about us, then I hope you really do write about things the way they really are. I guess that depends on you to some extent but you know that there are more of us who are going to work every day than there are like the people who are git'n over."[17] His definition of "core black culture" resists essentialism and emphasizes diversity and tolerance for diversity. While acknowledging the stylistic uniqueness of African-American culture compared to Euro-American culture, the central facet of this core culture is the deep rooted sense of community, common history, and collective recognition that there is indeed an African-American culture and a "black" way of doing things. Regardless of the origins of a particular recipe, or the roots of a particular religion or Christian denomination, the cook and the congregation have no problem identifying these practices and institutions as "black."

Few ghetto ethnographers have understood or developed Gwaltney's insights into African-American urban culture. Whereas Gwaltney's notion of a core culture

incorporates a diverse and contradictory range of practices, attitudes, and relationships that are dynamic, historically situated, and ethnically hybrid, social scientists of his generation and after--especially those at the forefront of poverty studies--treat culture as if it were a set of behaviors. They assume that there is one identifiable ghetto culture, and what they observed was *it*. These assumptions, which continue to shape much current social science and most mass media representations of the "inner city," can be partly attributed to the way ethnographers are trained in the West. As James Clifford observed, anthropologists studying non-Western societies are not only compelled to describe the communities under interrogation as completely foreign to their own society, but if they are to be worthy of study as a group they must posses an identifiable, homogenous culture. Frequently that uniform culture is timeless, changing only in tiny increments over thousands of years. I think, in principal at least, the same holds true for interpretations of Black urban America. As a "foreign" culture, ethnographers can argue that inner city residents do not share "mainstream" values. Behavior is not treated as situational, an individual response to a specific set of circumstances; rather, they are acting according to their own unique cultural "norms."[18]

An interesting example of this kind of "Othering" can be found in David Schulz's book, Coming Up Black. Schulz, a student of Lee Rainwater's, believes he has identified young black women's distinctive cultural or behavioral attitudes toward sex. Writing in the startled tone of an anthropologist on the verge of a groundbreaking discovery, he notes the following:

> Most ghetto adults, particularly women, admit to having more children than they desired. . . .
>
> Children pass out of the center of parental concern for a significant period in their grade school years. Formerly they were the center of attention and affection as the baby of the house, now they are comparatively ignored. Later they are once again much more central to their parent's concern, but then it is more likely to be as source of trouble. . . .

> Sex is 'natural' in the ghetto and girls generally 'do it' to please their boyfriends. From an early age there is much experience in sexual play, but little understanding of the possible consequences. . . .[19]

That Schulz probably described the experience of most American girls passing from infancy through puberty seems to have escaped his attention. In any case, for Schulz as well as most of his contemporaries doing ethnographies of black ghettoes, what seems to be the defining characteristic of African-American urban culture are relations between men and women. Even Charles Keil, whose Urban Blues is one of the few ethnographic texts from that period to not only examine aesthetics and form in black culture but take "strong exception to the view that lower-class Negro life style and its characteristic rituals and expresssive roles are the products of overcompensation for masculine self-doubt," nonetheless concludes that "the battle of the sexes" is precisely what characterizes African-American urban culture.[20]

Expressive cultures, then, were not only constructed as adaptive, functioning primarily to cope with the horrible conditions of ghetto life, but they were male. The only cultural practices worth studying and commenting on were expressions of masculinity. Two illuminating examples are the concept of "soul" and the verbal art form known to most academics as "the dozens." In the ethnographic imagination, "soul" and "the dozens" were both regarded as examples par excellance of authentic black urban culture as well as vehicles for expressing black masculinity. The bias toward expressive male culture must be understood within a particular historical and political context. In midst of urban rebellions, the masculinist rhetoric of black nationalism, the controversy over the Moynihan report, and the uncritical linking of "agency" and resistance with men, black men took center stage in poverty research. As Lee Rainwater explained, "The focus on soul concepts, on expressiveness and the street life which is its most appropriate context, involves also a focus by researchers on ghetto men rather than on the women and children who have been the focus of much earlier research. The focus perfectly mirrored, and was perhaps also stimulated by, the

shift from primarily passive images of Negroes that were congenial to traditional Southern-oriented race studies to more aggressive images congenial to studies in the big Northern cities particularly as, one by one, they were struck by ghetto riots."[21]

"Soul" was so critical to the social science discourse on the adaptive culture of the black urban poor that Rainwater edited an entire book about it, and Ulf Hannerz structured his study of Washington, D.C. on it.[22] According to these authors, "soul" is the expressive lifestyle of black men adapting to economic and political marginality. This one word supposedly embraces the entire range of "Negro lower class culture"; it constitutes "essential Negroness." Only authentic Negroes had "soul." In defining soul, Hannerz reduces aesthetics, style, and the dynamic struggle over identity to a set of coping mechanisms. Among his many attempts to define soul, he insists that it is tied to the instability of black male-female relationships. Evidence for this is deduced from his findings that "success with the opposite sex is a focal concern in lower-class Negro life," and the fact that a good deal of popular black music--soul music--was preoccupied with courting or losing a lover.[23]

Being "cool" is an indispensable component of soul; it is also regarded by these ethnographers as a peculiarly black expression of masculinity. Indeed, the entire discussion of "cool" centers entirely on black men. And "cool" as an aesthetic, as a style, as an art form expressed through langauge and the body, is simply not dealt with. Cool, not surprisingly, is merely another mechanism to cope with racism and poverty. According to Lee Rainwater and David Schulz, it is nothing more than a survival technique intended to "make yourself interesting and attractive to others so that you are better able to manipulate their behavior along lines that will provide some immediate gratification." To achieve cool simply entails learning to lie and putting up a front of competence and success. But like a lot of adaptive strategies, "cool" is self-limiting. While it helps young black males maintain an image of being "in control," according to David Schulz, it can also make "intimate relationships" more difficult to achieve. "A

mother may thus teach her son how to be cool with some ambivalence, for it is an aid to survival in the street, but tends to be a barrier to domestic intimacy."[24]

Although Hannerz reluctantly admits that no matter how hard he tried, none of the "authentic ghetto inhabitants" he had come across could define soul. He was certain soul was "essentially Negro" but concluded that it really could not be defined, for to do that would be to undermine its meaning: it is something one possesses, a ticket into the "in crowd." If you need a defintion you don't know what it means. It's a Black (Male) Thang; you'll never understand. But Hannerz obviously felt confident enough to venture his own definition based on his understanding of African-American culture as little more than a survival strategy to cope with the harsh realities of the ghetto. Moreover, he felt empowered to determine which black people had the right to claim the mantle of authenticity: when LeRoi Jones and Lerone Bennett offered their interpretation of "soul," Hannerz rejected their definitions, in part because they were not, in his words, "authentic Negroes."[25]

By constructing the black urban world as a single culture whose function is merely to survive the ghetto, Rainwater, Hannerz, and most of their colleagues at the time, ultimately collapsed a wide range of historically specific cultural practices and forms and searched for a (*the*) concept that could bring them all together. Such an interpretation of culture makes it impossible for Hannerz and others to see "soul" not as a thing but as a discourse through which African-Americans, at a particular historical moment, claimed ownership of the symbols and practices of their own imagined community. This is why, even at the height of the Black Power movement, African-American urban culture could be so fluid, hybrid, and multinational. In Harlem in the 1970's, Nehru suits were as popular and as "black" as dashikis, and martial arts films placed Bruce Lee among a pantheon of black heroes that included Walt Frazier and John Shaft. As debates over the black aesthetic raged, the concept of soul was an assertion that there are "black ways" of doing things, even if those ways are contested

and the boundaries around what is "black" are fluid. How it manifests itself and how it shifts is less important than the fact that the boundaries exist in the first place. At the very least, soul was a euphemism or a creative way of identifying what many believed was a black aesthetic or black style, and it was a synonym for black itself or a way to talk about being black without reference to color, which is why people of other ethnic groups could have "soul."

The ethnographic and sociological search for "soul" has made a comeback recently under a new name: the "cool pose." In a recent book, Richard Majors and Jane Mancini Bilson have recycled the arguments of Rainwater, Ulf Hannerz, Elliot Liebow, and David Shulz, and have suggested that the "cool pose" captures the essence of young black male expressive culture. Like earlier constructions of "soul," they too believe that the "cool pose" is an adaptive strategy to cope with the particular forms of racism and oppression black males face in America. "Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control." Echoing earlier works, the "cool pose" is also a double-edged sword since it allegedly undermines potential intimacy with females.[26] By playing down the aesthetics of cool and reducing the cool pose to a response by heterosexual black males to racism, intraracial violence, and poverty, the authors not only reinforce the idea there is an essential black urban culture created by the oppressive conditions of the ghetto but ignore manifestations of the cool pose in the public "performances" of black women, gay black men, and the African-American middle class.

A more tangible example of black urban expressive culture that seemed to captivate social scientists in the 1960's is the "dozens." Yet, in spite of the amount of ink devoted to the subject, it has also been perhaps the most misinterpreted cultural form coming out of African-American communities. Called at various times in various places "capping," "sounding," "ranking," "bagging," "dissing," etc., virtually all

leading anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists agree that it is a black male form of "ritual insult," a verbal contest involving any number of young black men who compete by talking about each other's mama. There is less agreement, however, about how to interpret the sociological and psychological significance of the "dozens." In keeping with the dominant social science interpretations of the culture concept, so-called "ritual insults" among urban black youth was either another adaptive strategy or an example of social pathology.[27]

The amazing thing about the sociological and ethnographic scholarship on the "dozens," from John Dollard's ruminations in 1939 to the more recent misreadings by Roger Lane and James Scott, is the consistency with which they repeat the same errors. For one, the almost universal assertion that the "dozens" is a "ritual" empowers the ethnographer to select what appears to be more formalized verbal exchanges (e.g., rhyming couplets) and ascribe to them greater "authenticity" than other forms of playful conversation. In fact, by framing the dozens as ritual, most scholars have come to believe that it is first and foremost a "contest" with rules, players, and mental scorecards rather than the daily banter of many (not all) young African-Americans. Anyone who has lived, thrived, and survived the dozens (or whatever name you want to call it) cannot imagine turning to one's friends and announcing, "hey, let's go outside and play the dozens." Furthermore, the very use of the term "ritual" to describe everyday speech reinforces the exoticization of black urban populations, constructing them as Others whose investment in this cultural tradition is much deeper than trying to get a laugh.

These problems, however, are tied to larger ones. For example, white ethnographers seemed oblivious to the fact that their very presence shaped what they observed. By asking their subjects to "play the dozens" while an interloper records the "session" with a tape recorder and notepad has the effect of creating a ritual performance for the sake of an audience, of turning spontaneous, improvised verbal

exchanges into a formal practice. More significantly, ethnographers have tailor-made their own interpretation of the dozens by selecting what they believe were the most authentic sites for such verbal duels--streetcorners, pool halls, bars, parks. In other words, they sought out male spaces rather than predominantly female and mix-gender spaces to record the dozens. It is no wonder that practically all commentators on the dozens have concluded that it is a boy thing. Again, anyone who has lived the dozens knows that young women engaged in these kinds of verbal exchanges as much as their male counterparts, both with men and between women. And they were no less profane. By not searching out other mixed-gender and female spaces such as school busses, cafeterias, kitchen tables, beauty salons, and house parties, ethnographers have misunderstood the extent to which the dozens also belonged to young black women.[28]

Folklorist Roger Abrahams, who pioneered the study of the dozens in his book on black vernacular folklore "from the streets of Philadelphia," is one of the few scholars to appreciate the pleasure and aesthetics of such verbal play. Nevertheless, he argues that one of the primary functions of the dozens is to compensate for a lack of masculinity caused by too many absent fathers and domineering mothers, which is why the main target of insults is an "opponent's" mother. "By exhibiting his wit, by creating new and vital folkoric expression, [the dozens player] is able to effect a temporary release from anxiety for both himself and his audience. By creating playgrounds for playing out aggressions, he achieves a kind of masculine identity for himself and his group in a basically hostile environment."[29] David Schulz offers an even more specific interpretation of the dozens as a form of masculine expression in an environment dominated by dysfunctional families. He writes: "Playing the dozens occurs at the point when the boy is about to enter puberty and suffer his greatest rejection from his mother as a result of his becoming a man. The dozens enables him to develop a defense against this rejection and provides a vehicle for his transition into the manipulative world of the street dominated by masculine values expressed in gang

life." It then serves as a "ritualized exorcism" that allows men to break from maternal dominance and "establish their own image of male superiority celebrated in street life."[30]

The presumption that the dozens and other forms of black vernacular speech encoded the struggle to create a masculine identity in a world of single parents reached absurd proportions when Lee Rainwater attempted to uncover the secret meaning of the word "motherfucker" in his classic ethnography, Behind Ghetto Walls. "Motherfucker," Rainwater concluded,

> acquires its particular significance in the lower class Negro world as a commentary on, an observation about, the disjunction between the monogamous and circumspect *ideal* about with whom and under what circumstances women should have sexual relations, and the fact of widespread sexual involvement between men and women who are not married to each other and whose 'illicit' relationships are taken for granted.
>
> *Motherfucker* is a way of describing this aspect of family and sexual life in the Negro slum culture. . . . By juxtaposing the semi-sacred idea of motherhood with the idea of a woman who is available to males other than her spouse, and by suggesting the relationship of older women to younger men it also supports the systematic de-emphasis on age homogenieity of sexual partners that is apparent in lower-class Negro life.[31]

So is this what Isaac Hayes meant when he called John Shaft a "baaaad mother. . . .?"

The goal of the dozens and related verbal games is deceptively simple: to get a laugh. The pleasure of the dozens is not the viciousness of the insult but the humor, the creative pun, the outrageous metaphor. Contrary to popular belief, mother's are not the *sole* target; the subjects include fathers, grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, friends, food, skin color, body odor, hairstyles, etc. I am not suggesting that "your mama" is unimportant in the whole structure of these verbal exchanges. Rather, we need to understand that "your mama" in this context is almost never living, literal, or even metaphoric. "Your mama" is a generic reference, a code signalling that the dozens have begun--it signifies a shift in speech. "Your mama" is also a mutable, nameless body of a shared imagination that can be constructed and reconstructed in a thousand different shapes, sizes, colors, and circumstances. The emphasis on "your

mama" in most *interpretations* of the dozens has more to do with the peculiar preoccupation of social science with Negro family structure than anything else. Besides, in many cases the target is immaterial; your mama, your daddy, your greasy-headed granny are merely vehicles through which the speaker tries to elicit a laugh. In retrospect, this seems obvious, but amid the complicated readings of masculine overcompensation and ritual performance, only a handful of writers of the period--most of whom were African-Americans with no affiliation to the academy--recognized the centrality of humor. One was Howard Seals who self-published a pamphlet on the dozens in 1969 titled *You Ain't Thuh Man Yuh Mamma Wuz*. In an effort to put to rest all the sociological overinterpretation, Seals explains: "The emotional tone to be maintained is that of hilariously, outrageously funny bantering."[32] Compare Seals' comment with linguist William Labov, who, while recognizing the humor ultimately turns laughter into part of the ritual and thus reinforces the process of Othering:

> The primary mark of positive evaluation is laughter. We can rate the effectiveness of a sound in a group session by the number of members of the audience who laugh.
>
> A really successful sound will be evaluated by overt comments. . . the most common forms are: "Oh!", "Oh shit!" "God damn!", or "Oh lord!" By far the most common is "Oh shit!" The intonation is important; when approval is to be signalled the vowel of each word is quite long, with a high sustained initial pitch, and a slow-falling pitch contour.[33]

Without a concept of, or even an interest in, aesthetics, style, the visceral pleasures of cultural forms, it should not be surprising that most social scientists explained black urban culture in terms of "coping mechanisms," "rituals," or oppositional responses to racism. And trapped by an essentialist interpretation of culture, they continue to look for that elusive "authentic" ghetto sensibility, the true, honest, unbridled, pure cultural practices that capture the raw, ruffneck "reality" of urban life. Today, especially among more left-leaning scholars, that authentic ghetto sensibility is rap music. While studies of rap and Hip Hop culture have been useful in terms of nudging contemporary poverty studies to pay attention to expressive cultures,

it has not done much to advance the culture concept in social science. Like its progenitor, the dozens, rap or Hip Hop has been subject to incredible misconception and overinterpretation. (And, in retrospect, my own essay in the Nation last year unfortunately contributed to the latter.[34]) Despite the brilliant writing of cultural critics like Tricia Rose, Greg Tate, James Spady, Joseph Eure, and Michael Eric Dyson, a number of scholars have returned to or revised the interpretive frameworks developed by the previous generation of ethnographers.[35]

A good example of this is Tommy Lott's recent essay, "Marooned in America: Black Urban Youth Culture and Social Pathology." Although he offers a useful critique of neoconservative culture of poverty theories and challenges assumptions that the culture of the so-called underclass is pathological, he nevertheless reduces expressive culture to a coping strategy to deal with the terror of street life. For Lott, the Hip Hop nation is the authentic voice of the black lumpenproletariat whose descriptions of "street life" are the real thing. "As inhabitants of extreme-poverty neighborhoods," he writes, "many rap artists and their audiences are entrenched in a street life filled with crime, drugs, and violence. Being criminal-minded and having street values are much more suitable for living in their environment." Ignoring for the moment that most rap music is not about a nihilistic street life but about rocking the mike, and that the vast majority of rap artists (like most inner city youth) were not entrenched in the tangled web of crime and violence, it is amazing how oblivious he is to his own essentialism. He is convinced that Hip Hop narratives of ghetto life "can only come from one's experiences on the streets. Although, at its worst, this knowledge is manifested through egotistical sexual boasting, the core meaning of the rapper's use of the term 'knowledge' is to be *politically* astute, that is, to have a full understanding of the conditions under which black urban youth must survive."[36]

By not acknowledging the fact that rap is, first and foremost, music, Lott completely ignores aesthetic considerations. For him Hip Hop is merely a political text

to be read like a less sophisticated version of the Nation or Radical America. But what counts more than the story is the "storytelling"--an MC's verbal facility on the mic, the creative and often hilarious use of puns, metaphors, similes, not to mention the ability to kick some serious slang (or what we might call linguistic inventiveness). As microphone fiend Rakim might put it, the function of Hip Hop is to "move the crowd," which is why boomin' drum tracks, a phat bass line, a few well-placed JB-style guitar riffs, and mad skillz on the wheels of steel count for so much. For all the implicit and explicit politics of rap lyrics, Hip Hop must be understood as a sonic force more than anything else. It has to be heard, volume pumping, bass in full effect, index finger in reach of the rewind button when a compelling sample, break beat, or lyric catches your attention.

Ignoring aesthetics enables Lott to not only dismiss "egotistical sexual boasting" as simply a weakness in political ideology but to mistakenly interpret narratives of everyday life as descriptions of personal experience rather than a revision of older traditions of black vernacular poetry and/or appropriations from mainstream popular culture. He is unaware of the influences of urban toasts and published "pimp narratives," which became popular during the late 1960's and early 1970's. In many instances the characters are almost identical, and on occasion rap artists pay tribute to toasting by lyrically "sampling" these early pimp narratives.[37] Moreover, he ignores the fact that the number one consumer of rap music are white males, a fact record company executives understand better than most scholars. The music intended as an oppositional counternarrative of dominant media constructions of black males also attracts listeners for whom the "ghetto" is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom. White music critic John Leland, who claimed that Ice Cube's political turn "killed rap music," praised NWA because they "dealt in evil as fantasy: killing cops, smoking hos, filling quiet nights with a flurry of senseless buckshot." This kind of voyeurism partly

explains NWA's huge white following and why their album, Efil4zaggin, shot to the top of the charts as soon as it was released. As one critic put it, "In reality, NWA have more in common with a Charles Bronson movie than a PBS documentary on the plight of the inner-cities." NWA members have even admitted that some of their recent songs were not representations of reality "in the hood" but inspired by popular films like "Innocent Man" starring Tom Selleck, and "Tango and Cash."[38]

As we have seen thus far, Lott's claim to have located the authentic voice of black ghetto youth is certainly not unique. And he is only one of a long list of scholars who insist that Hip Hop is the pure, unadulterated voice of a ghetto that has grown increasingly isolated from "mainstream" society. Missing from this formulation is rap music's incredible hybridity. From the outset, rap music embraced a variety of styles and cultural forms, from reggae and salsa to heavy metal and jazz. Hip Hop's hybridity reflected, in part, the increasingly international character of America's inner cities resulting from immigration, demographic change, and new forms of information, as well as the inventive employment of technology in creating rap music. By using two turntables, and later digital samplers, dj's played different records, isolated the "break beats" or what they identified as the funkiest part of a song, and boldly mixed a wide range of different music and musical genres to create new music. And despite the fact that many of the pioneering dj's, rappers, and break dancers were African-American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican and strongly identified with the African diaspora, rap artists wrecked all the boundaries between "black" and "white" music. DJ Afrika Islam remembers vividly the time when Hip Hop and punk united for a moment and got busy at the New Wave clubs in New York during the early 1980's. Even before the punk rockers sought a relationship with uptown Hip Hop dj's, Afrika Islam recalls, in the Bronx they were already playing "everything from Aerosmith's 'Walk This Way' to Dunk and the Blazers." Grand Master Caz, whose lyrics were stolen by the Sugarhill Gang and ended up in "Rapper's Delight" (the first successful rap record in history),

grew up in the Bronx listening to a lot of soft rock and mainstream pop music. As he explained in an interview, "Yo, I'd bug you out if I told you who I used to listen to. I used to listen to Barry Manilow, Neil Diamond, and Simon and Garfunkel. I grew up listening to that. WABC. That's why a lot of the stuff that my group did, a lot of routines that were famous for all come from all white boy songs."[39]

If you saw a picture of Caz, this statement would seem incongruous. He looks the part of an authentic black male, a real ruffneck, hoodie, "G," nigga, criminal, menace. He would look more at home atop a Harlem rooftop than Cornel West does on the cover of Race Matters. And yet, he is a product of a hybrid existence, willing to openly talk about Simon and Garfunkel in a book that I could only purchase from a Nation of Islam booth on 125th Street in Harlem. He is also the first to call what he does "black music," structured noise for which the beat, no matter where it's taken from, is everything. Moreover, like the breakers who danced to his rhymes, the kids who built his speakers, the dj who spun the records, Caz takes credit for his creativity, his artistry, his "work." This is the "black urban culture" which has remained so elusive to social science; it is the thing, or rather the process, that defies concepts like "coping strategy," "adaptative," "authentic," "nihilistic," and "pathological."

REVISING THE CULTURE CONCEPT: HYBRIDITY, STYLE, AND AESTHETICS IN BLACK URBAN CULTURE

Aside from the tendency to ignore expressive/popular cultural forms, and limit the category of culture to (so-called dysfunctional) behavior, the biggest problem with the way social scientists employ the culture concept in their studies of the black urban poor is their inability to see what it all means *to the participants and practitioners*. In other words, they don't consider what Clinton (George, that is) calls the "pleasure principle." If I may use a metaphor here, rather than hear the singer they analyze the lyrics; rather than hear the drum they study the song title. Black music, creativity and experimentation in language, that walk, that talk, that style, must be understood

primarily as sources of visceral and psychic pleasure. Though they may also reflect and speak to the political and social world of inner city communities, expressive cultures are not simply mirrors of social life or expressions of conflicts, pathos, and anxieties.

Although Paul Willis at times tends toward overinterpretation of working-class cultures, his concept of "symbolic creativity" provides one way out of the impasse created by such a limited concept of culture. As Willis argues, constructing an identity, communicating with others, and achieving pleasure are all part of symbolic creativity--it is literally the labor of creating art in everyday life. Despite his distrust and vehement opposition to "aesthetics," he realizes that, in most cases, the explicit meaning or intention of a particular cultural form is not the thing that makes it attractive. The appeal of popular music, for example, is more than lyrical: "songs bear meaning and allow symbolic work not just as speech acts, but also as structures of sound with unique rhythms, textures and forms. Thus, it is not always what is sung, but the *way* it is sung, within particular conventions or musical genres which gives a piece of music its communicative power and meaning."[40] While this might be a new discovery for cultural studies scholars, it has been an all-too-obvious fact for most African-Americans identified with what Gwaltney calls the "core culture." Indeed, words like "soul" and "funk" were efforts to come up with a language to talk about that visceral element in music, even if they did ultimately evolve into market categories. Over two decades ago, black novelist Cecil Brown brilliantly captured this "thing," this symbolic creativity, the pleasure principle, soul, or whatever you want to call it. Writing about the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, he argued that his lyrics are less important than how they are uttered, where they are placed rhythmically, and "how he makes it sound." "What, for instance, does 'Mother Popcorn' mean? But what difference does it make when you're dancing to it, when you are feeling it, when you

are it and it you (possession). It's nothing and everything at once; it is what black (hoodoo) people who never studied art in school mean by art."[41]

Yet to say its a "black" thing doesn't mean it is made up entirely of black things. As Greg Tate suggests in the epigraph, interpreters of the African-American experience--in our case social scientists--have been more responsible for turning ghetto residents into a monolith than African-American communities themselves. (This is not to say black folks outside the academy don't participate or are not invested in essentialist notions of blackness, but that's another essay altogether.) We can no longer ignore the fact that information technology, new forms of mass communication, and immigration have made the rest of the world more accessible to inner city residents than ever before.[42] Contemporary black urban culture is a cultural hybrid that draws on Afro-diasporic traditions, popular culture, the vernacular of previous generations of Southern and Northern black folk, new and old technologies, and a whole lot of imagination. James Clifford's advice for ethnographers of the non-Western experience, I believe, is useful for social scientists now trying to make sense of displaced and dispossessed black urban communities: "To tell these other stories, local histories of cultural survival and emergence, we need to resist deep-seated habits of mind and systems of authenticity. We need to be suspicious of an almost-automatic tendency to relegate non-Western (read: black) peoples and objects to the pasts of an increasingly homogenous humanity."[43]

NOTES

1. Greg Tate, Flyboy in the Buttermilk (New York, 1992), 153.

2. Quoted in John Langston Gwaltney, Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America (Vintage Books: New York, 1981), 105.
3. Mercer L. Sullivan, "Absent Fathers in the Inner City," The Annals, 501 (January 1989), 49-50.

4. Recent examples of the "culture of poverty" thesis include Nicholas Lemann, "The Origins of the Underclass: Part I," Atlantic Monthly, 257 (June 1986): 31-61, and "The Origins of the Underclass: Part II," Atlantic Monthly, 257 (July 1986): 54-68; Charles Murray, Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Ken Auletta, The Underclass (New York: Random House, 1982). Critics of the culture of poverty thesis are many. See especially Charles Valentine, Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968); H.J. Gans, "Culture and Class in the Study of Poverty: An Approach to Antipoverty Research," in D.P. Moynihan (ed.), On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences (New York: Basic Books, 1968); William J. Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); David T. Ellwood, Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family. New York: Basic Books, 1988; Sheldon Danzinger and Peter Gottschalk, "The Poverty of Losing Ground," Challenge, 28 (May/June 1985), 32-38; William Darity and Samuel L. Meyers, "Does Welfare Dependency Cause Female Headship? The Case of the Black Family," Journal of Marriage and the Family 46, no. 4 (1984), 765-79; Mary Corcoran, Greg J. Duncan, Gerald Gurin, and Patricia Gurin, "Myth and Reality: The Causes and Persistence of Poverty," Journal of Policy Analysis and Management 4, no. 4 (1985), 516-36.

For structuralist interepretations of urban poverty, see See Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged; William Julius Wilson and Loic J.D. Wacquant, "The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City," The Annals, 501 (January 1989), 8-25; John D. Kasarda, "Caught in a Web of Change," Society 21 (November/December 1983), 41-47, and "Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass," The Annals, 501 (January 1989), 26-47; Maxine Baca Zinn, "Family, Race, and Poverty in the Eighties," Signs 14, no. 4 (1989), 856-874; Mary Corcoran, Greg J. Duncan, and Martha S. Hill, "The Economic Fortunes of Women and Children: Lessons from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics," Signs 10, no. 2 (1984), 232-48; Mary Jo Bane, "Household Composition and Poverty," in Sheldon Danzinger and Daniel Weinberg (eds.), Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn't (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Ellwood, Poor Support; Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Richard Child Hill and Cynthia Negrey, "Deindustrialization and Racial Minorities in the Great Lakes Region, USA," in D. Stanley Eitzen and Maxine Baca Zinn (eds.), The Reshaping of America: Social Consequences of the Changing Economy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989); Elliot Currie and Jerome H. Skolnick, America's Problems: Social Issues and Public Policy (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1984).

5. See his introduction to The Underclass Debate: Views from History (Princeton, 1993),

6. See, especially, Elijah Anderson, Streetwise; Anderson, Elijah. 1989. "Sex Codes and Family Life Among Poor Inner City Youth," The Annals 501 (January): 59-78;

Dunn, M. 1980. "The Cities' Black Poor: America's Angry Untouchables," Los Angeles Times, (August, 24); Duster, Troy. 1988. "Social Implications of the 'New' Black Underclass." Black Scholar 19 (May-June): 2-9; Jacquelyn Jones, The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present (Basic Books, 1992), the last chapter; Jencks, Christopher and Paul Peterson, eds., The Urban Underclass (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1992); Jencks, Rethinking Social Policy; Littman, Mark S. "Poverty areas and the underclass: untangling the web," Monthly Labor Review 114 (March 1991):19-32; Osterman, Paul. "Welfare participation in a full employment economy: the impact of neighborhood," Social Problems 38 (Nov., 1991):475-91; Singh, Vijai P. "The underclass in the United States: some correlates of economic change," Sociological Inquiry 61 (Fall 1991):505-21; Staff of Chicago Tribune. 1986. The American Millstone: An Examination of the Nation's Permanent Underclass. Chicago: Contemporary Books; Sullivan, Mercer L. 1989. "Absent Fathers in the Inner City," The Annals 501 (January): 48-58; Charles Murray, Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Ken Auletta, The Underclass (New York: Random House, 1982); Cornel West, Race Matters (1993) [INCOMPLETE].

7. Leman, Kotlowitz, Robert Anson, Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry (New York: Random House, 1988);

8. Edin, Kathryn. "Surviving the welfare system: how AFDC recipients make ends meet in Chicago," Social Problems 38 (Nov. 1991):462-74

9. Leonard Harris, "Agency and the Concept of the Underclass," in Bill E. Lawson, ed., The Underclass Question (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1992), 37.

10. Charles P. Henry, Culture and African-American Politics (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 12-13.

11. Lawrence Mead, Beyond Entitlement ; Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged ; Elijah Anderson, Streetwise ; West, Race Matters.

12. W.E.B. DuBois and Augustus Granville Dill, ed., Morals and Manners among Negro Americans, Atlanta University Publications, No. 18 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1914), 82, 85, 87, 93-94. DuBois has come to similar conclusions in his classic study, The Philadelphia Negro published in 1899(?).

13. Lee Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls ; Elliot Liebow, Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967); Ulf Hannerz, Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Carol B. Stack, All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Betty Lou Valentine, Hustling and Other Hard Work: Life Styles in the Ghetto (New York: Free Press, 1978); Joyce Ladner, Tommorrow's Tommorrow ; David Shulz, Coming up Black ;

14. Elliot Liebow, Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967); Ulf Hannerz, Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); Carol B. Stack, All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Betty Lou Valentine, Hustling and Other Hard Work: Life Styles in the Ghetto (New York: Free Press, 1978); Jay Macleod, Ain't No Makin' It: Leveled Aspirations in a Low-Income Neighborhood (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987); John Hagedorn,

with Perry Macon, People and Folks: Gangs, Crime and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1988)].

15. These typologies are drawn from Hannerz, Soulside; William McCord, John Howard, Bernard Friedberg, Edwin Harwood, Life Styles in the Black Ghetto (W.W. Norton: New York, 1969).

16. Gwaltney, Drylongso. Although I'm primarily speaking of white ethnographers during the 1960's and 1970's, there were a handful of African-Americans who went into the "field" during this period, the most prominent being Betty Lou Valentine (Hustling and Other Hard Work). But for all of Valentine's claims to having a detailed, authentic knowledge of the ghetto in which she resided, her method is no different than that of the mainstream ghetto ethnographers. Indeed, hers is in some ways more problematic since the only voice we here throughout her text is her own. [Discuss the amazing text by Eugene Useni Perkins, which uses both techniques but produced outside of the academy; and Elijah Anderson, both books do not break from traditional ethnographic method, despite claims to challenging the dominant paradigms. This is most evident in Streetwise, which is a throwback to the 1960's.

17. Gwaltney, Drylongso, xxiv, xxxii.

18. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 246. Don't get me wrong; the vast and rich ethnographic documentation collected by these scholars is extremely valuable. I use much of it as primary sources for my own book-in-progress because it captures the responses and survival strategies hidden from census data andilluminates the human aspects of poverty. Of course, these materials must be used with caution since most ethnographies do not pay much attention to historical and structural transformations; rather they describe and interpret a particular community during a brief moment in time. The failure to identify many of these communities only compounds the problem and presumes that region, political economy, history, etc., have no bearing on opportunity structures, opposition, or culture (for an extended critique, see Andrew H. Maxwell, "The Anthropology of Poverty in Black Communities: A Critique and Systems Alternative," Urban Anthropology 17, nos. 2 and 3 (1988), 171-192).

19. David A. Schulz, Coming Up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 57-58.

20. Charles Keil, Urban Blues (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), 1-12, 23. That so-called "expressive cultures" are male are so taken for granted that pioneering ethnographies focusing on African-American women and girls don't deal with it, whether in mixed gender groupings of all female groups. Even the sites change from streets to home, and topics from predatory behavior and hanging out to family, survival, and sex. (Carol Stack, All Our Kin ; Joyce Ladner, Tommorrow's Tommorrow; This dichotomy prevails in Elijah Anderson's more recent, Streetwise.]

21. Lee Rainwater, ed., Soul (Trans-Action Books, 1970), 9.

22. Rainwater, ed., Soul (especially essays by John Horton, Thomas Kochman, and David Wellman); Ulf Hannerz, "The Significance of Soul" in *Ibid.*, 15-30; Hannerz, Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and community (New York, 1969), 144-58; For interpretations of "soul," see Lee Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls, ; Keil, Urban Blues, 164-90; William L. Van Deburg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power

Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Claude Brown, "The Language of Soul," in Alan Dundes, ed., Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrell: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore (Garland Publishing Co.: New York, 1981), 232-43; Roger D. Abrahams, Positively Black (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), 136-50.

23. Hannerz, "The Significance of Soul," 21.

24. Schulz, Coming Up Black, 78, 103; Lee Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum (Aldine Publishing Co.: Chicago, 1970), 372; see also, John Horton, "Time and Cool People," in Rainwater, ed., Soul, 31-50.

25. Hannerz, "The Significance of Soul," 22-23.

26, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Bilson, The Cool Pose: the Dilemmas of Manhood in America (New York, 1992), quoted from pg. 4.

27. Historian Roger Lane treats the dozens as a manifestation of a larger pathological culture: "Afro-American culture was marked by an aggressively competitive strain compounded of bold display, semiritualistic insult, and an admiration of violence in verbal form at least. 'Playing the dozens,' a contest involving the exchange of often sexual insults directed not only at the participants but at their families, especially their mothers, was one example of this strain. . . ." (Lane, Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900 (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 146-7. [CITE ADDITIONAL WORKS ON THE DOZENS]

There are some exceptions, such as the work of some linguists and literary scholars who treat the dozens as a larger set of signifying practices found in black vernacular English or focus on the aesthetics of language. For these authors, style is not merely a manifestation of social structure. See Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying, Loud-talking, and Marking," in Rappin and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America (Urbana and Chicago, 1972); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York and Oxford, 1988), especially 64-88; Houston Baker, Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1972), 115. Despite disagreements between Baker and Gates, both try to make sense of black vernacular culture--including the dozens--as art rather than sociology.

28. A beginning is Marjorie Harness Goodwin, He-Said-She-Said: Talk as Social Organization Among Black Children (Bloomington and Indiannapolis, 1990), esp. pp. 222-223. However, Goodwin emphasizes "ritual insult" as a means of dealing with disputes rather than an art form and thus is still squarely situated within social scientists emphasis on function over style and pleasure.

29. Roger Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia (Chicago, 1970), 60, 88-96; see also, Roger D. Abrahams, Talking Black (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1976).

30. Schulz, Coming Up Black, p. 68. In William McCord, et. al., Lifestyles in the Ghetto, Edwin Harwood argues further that the lack of a father leads to violent uprisings and low self-esteem among black male youth. "Negro males who are brought up primarily by mothers and other female relatives pick pu from them their hostility toward the males who are not there, or if they are, are not doing worth-while work in society. In such an environment it must be difficult to develop a consructive masculine self-image and the ambivalent self-image that does emerge can only be resolved in

ways destructive both to the self and the society, through bold and violent activities that are only superficially masculine. If this analysis is correct, then the Negro youth who hurls a brick or an insult at the white cop is not just reacting in anger to white society, but on another level is discharging aggression toward the father who 'let him down' and females whose hostility toward inadequate men raised doubts about his own sense of masculinity." (pp. 32-33)

31. Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls, 387-88

32. Eugene Perkins, Home is a Dirty Street: The Social Oppression of Black Children (Chicago: Third World Press, 1975), 32.

33. William Labov, Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn Press, 1972), 325. David Schulz, however, doesn't even trust the laughter of his subjects. He writes, "with careful listening one becomes suspicious of the laughter of the ghetto. So much apparent gaiety has a purpose all too often in the zero-sum contest system of interpersonal manipulation for personal satisfaction and gain." (Schulz, Coming Up Black, p. 5)

34. See my "Straight from Underground," Nation 254, no. 22 (June 8, 1992), 793-96. Although it has been circulated and discussed as an essay on hip hop in Los Angeles, the piece was written as a provocative political commentary on the experiences of black youth in Los Angeles prior to the uprising. I used L.A. gangsta rap merely as a vehicle to discuss how young people have sustained an alternative discourse and collective memory of police brutality and the economic transformation of their communities. Unfortunately, other scholars have used the piece as evidence that rap is the true, authentic "voice from the streets." In my longer pieces on L.A. gangsta rap I place much greater emphasis on aesthetics, style, vernacular traditions, as well as the market place. In that piece I offered a number of warnings and caveats, including the following: "Lest we get too sociological here, we must bear in mind that Hip Hop, irrespective of its particular "flavor," is music. Few doubt it has a message, whether they interpret it as straight-up nihilism or the words of "primitive rebels." Not many pay attention to rap as art--whether they are mixing break beats from Funkadelic, gangsta limpin' in black hoodies, appropriating old-school "hustler's toasts," or simply trying to be funny. Although the following admittedly emphasizes lyrics, it also tries to deal with form, style and aesthetics. This is a critical lesson cultural critic Tricia Rose has been drumming into students of African-American popular culture for some time. As she puts it, "Without historical contextualization, aesthetics are naturalized, and certain cultural practices are made to appear essential to a given group of people. On the other hand, without aesthetic considerations, Black cultural practices are reduced to extensions of sociohistorical circumstances." ("Menace to Society: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (forthcoming, 1994).

35. See, for example, Venise T. Berry, "Rap Music, Self Concept and Low Income Black Adolescents," Popular Music and Society 14, no. 3 (Fall 1990); Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Urban Black American Music in the Late 1980's: The Word as Cultural Signifier," Midwest Quarterly 30 (Winter, 1989), 229-41; Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present (New York, 1990); Jon Michael Spencer, ed., The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap (special issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1991); Andre Craddock-Willis, "Rap Music and the Black Musical Tradition: A Critical Assessment," Radical America 23, no. 4 (June, 1991). The more sophisticated work that aesthetics as well as social and political

contexts include Greg Tate, Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America (1992); Joseph G. Eure and James G. Spady, eds., Nation Conscious Rap (1991); Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Cultural Resistance in Contemporary American Popular Culture (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, forthcoming 1994); idem., "Orality and Technology: Rap Music and Afro-American Cultural Resistance," Popular Music and Society 13, no. 4 (Winter 1989); idem., "'Fear of a Black Planet': Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990's," Journal of Negro Education 60, no. 3 (1991); idem., "Black Texts/Black Contexts," in Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992); Michael Eric Dyson, Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism (Minneapolis, 1993). Two good general histories are Steve Hager, Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Breakdancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); David Toop, Rap Attack 2 (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

36. Tommy Lott, "Marooned in America: Black Urban Youth Culture and Social Pathology," in Bill E. Lawson, ed., The Underclass Question (Philadelphia, 1992), 71, 72, 80-81.

37. Digital Underground's, "Good Thing We're Rappin'," Sons of the P (Tommy Boy, 1991) is nothing if not a tribute to the pimp narratives. One hears elements of classic toasts, including "The Pimp," "Dogass Pimp," "Pimping Sam," "Wicked Nell," "The Lame and the Whore," and perhaps others. Even the meter is very much in the toasting tradition. (For transcriptions of these toasts, see Bruce Jackson, "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me": Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition [Cambridge, MA., 1974], 106-30.) Similar examples which resemble the more comical pimp narratives include Ice Cube, "I'm Only Out for one Thing," AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted (Priority, 1990) and Son of Bazerk, "Sex, Sex, and more Sex," Son of Bazerk (MCA, 1991).

38. See John Leland, "Rap: Can it Survive Self-Importance?" Details (July, 1991), 108; Frank Owen, Hanging Tough," Spin 6, no. 1 (April, 1990), 34; James Bernard, "NWA [Interview]," The Source (December, 1990), 34. In fact, Ice Cube left NWA in part because they were not "political" enough. Though most accounts indicate that financial disputes between Cube and manager Jerry Heller caused the split, in at least one interview he implied that politics had something to it as well. As early as Straight Outta Compton, Cube wanted to include more like "F--- the Police," and when the FBI sent a warning to them because of their inflammatory lyrics, Cube planned to put out a 12 minute remix in response. Of course, neither happened. It finally became clear to Cube that he could not remain in NWA after Jerry Heller kept them from appearing on Jesse Jackson's weekly TV show. Darryl James, "Ice Cube Leaves NWA to Become Amerikkka's Most Wanted," Rappin' (January, 1991), 20.

39. Quoted in James G. Spady and Joseph Eure, Nation Conscious Rap, xiii, xxviii; see also, Steve Hager, Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Breakdancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); David Toop, Rap Attack 2 (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Tricia Rose, "Orality and Technology: Rap Music and Afro-American Cultural Resistance," Popular Music and Society 13, no. 4 (Winter 1989); Reebee Garofalo, "Hip Hop for High School: An Abbreviated History for Students," Radical America (November-December, 1984).

40. Paul Willis, Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990), 1-5, 65.

41. Cecil Brown, "James Brown, Hoodoo and Black Culture," Black Review 1 (1971): 184

42. For insightful discussions of the way information technology in the late 20th century has opened up new spaces for building cultural links between inner cities and the African diaspora, see George Lipsitz, "Disaporic Noise: History, Hip Hop, and the Post-Colonial Politics of Sound," (unpublished paper in author's possession); Paul Gilroy, "'It Ain't Where You're From Its Where You're At--The Dialectics of Diaspora Identification," Callaloo (Summer 1991).

43. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 246.