stereo, sounding majestic despite having to poot out of my ruined speakers. Neither of us made conversation; I wanted to hear some MMJ, and I thought he was nervous about not having permission from his censors to join me for a drive. We ate in the car with the music on, sucked Cokes as we watched lovers in the park across the street compose their own concordances. On our way back, he pointed to my CD player and said, "I'm not allowed to listen to music." I thought, *Who are his parents, the Taliban?* He continued, "But if I could listen to music, I would want to listen to this."

TA-NEHISI COATES

Keepin' It Unreal

$elling the Myth of Bla¢k Male Violen¢e, Long Past Its Expiration Date

Yeah, they want reality, but you will hear none/
They'd rather exaggerate a little fiction.

—N.W.A, "Express Yourself"

The promotion of 50 Cent from bootleg king to god of the streets was PR genius. His handlers have played the angle magnificently. The attempts on his life come up repeatedly in interviews, and 50 is happy to provide embellishment. Even critics have bought into the mystique—review after review of 50's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* cites his battle scars as evidence of his true-to-life depiction of the streets. On the cover of *Rolling Stone*, he posed with his back to the camera, exposing one of his wounds. Who knew nine bullet holes could be such a boon?

Now the banners are unfurling: "2003: the year hip-hop returned to the streets." You can thank 50 for that. *Get Rich* has been hyped as the most realistic representation of the ghetto since the heyday of Biggie. To its credit, the album turns down the bling factor considerably. 50 could care less about what whip you're pushing or the cut of your Armani. All that concerns him is your (preferably violent) downfall. Add in 50's work history in the narcotics trade and his ran-

dom swipes at supposed wanksta Ja Rule and you have the makings of the most legitimate gangsta rapper since Jay-Z.

But not much more. At its core the hubbub around *Get Rich* and the return of gangsta rap is crack-era nostalgia taken to the extreme. Imagine—articulate young black men pining for the heyday of black-on-black crime. Like all nostalgia, neo-gangsta is stuck in history rather than rooted in current reality. The sobering fact is that the streets as 50 presents them, brimming with shoot-outs and crack fiends, do not exist. Of course, drugs are still a plague on America's house, and America's gun violence is a black mark on the developed world. But millennial black America is hardly the Wild West scene it was during gangsta rap's prime. Gangsta could once fairly claim to reflect a brutal present. Now it mythicizes a past that would fade away much faster without it.

In the late '80s, young black men—gangsta rap's creators, and its primary constituency—became their own worst enemies. Drug dealing was becoming a legitimate, if deadly, life option, and with it came an arms race that turned Anyghetto, U.S.A., into Saigon. The Harlem Renaissance drew its power from the optimism of the New Negro, the Black Arts movement pulled from Black Power, gangsta rap tapped the crack age. If Motown and Stax were the joyful noise of us unshackling ourselves into the dream ("Are you ready for a brand-new beat?"), gangsta rap was the sound of us crashing back into the desert of the real ("Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money").

The crash is complete, and in any black community you can find the rubble—uneducated, unemployable young black men. Their narrative no longer rings with the romance of a Nino Brown. Crack is played, and so, apparently, is fratricide—murder rates in the black community have been dropping since the mid '90s. The way of the gun still takes its toll, but Saigon has been pacified. Mundane afflictions like unpaid child support and industrial flight have once again come to the fore.

The streets that gangsta rappers claim as their source are no longer as angry as they are sad. For that reason alone, gangsta rap should be dead by now. But still it lingers, fueled by America's myth of the menacing black man. Gangsta rap today is about as reflective

of reality as, well, a reality show. And yet still it lumbers across the landscape of pop, shouting "I'm Real."

* * *

Step away with your fistfight ways/
Muthafucka this ain't back in the days.

—THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G., "THINGS DONE CHANGED"

Some 17 years ago, I was ambling past a local 7-Eleven on my way home from school. There in front of the store where I frequently leafed through copies of *X-Men*, I met gangsta rap in its most tangible form. It was 1986—the year Schoolly D birthed the genre with his single "PSK (What Does It Mean?)"—and the old order of Afro-America was coming apart. Black fathers were going M.I.A., guns were flooding the streets, and crackheads were multiplying. I was young and too obsessed with *Transformers* and *Galaxy Rangers* to notice the walls caving in around me.

And then at that 7-Eleven I watched a kid unveil the biggest, blackest handgun I'd ever seen. He and his friends had been arguing with another clique when the one kid dropped the trump card. It was like something out of the dollar flicks, scored by my heart pounding like a timpani. No cars pulled into the parking lot. No one ducked or screamed. I did not move. With his point made, the kid returned his tool to his jacket and walked away laughing with his friends, taking my innocence with him.

Whatever I had left was beaten out of me during my first year of middle school. I got jumped so often that I spent that year searching for alternate paths home, some of them integrating bus routes even though I lived around the corner. A new road map might save me from a critical beatdown. But as the gangsta rap era geared up, the bumrush became the least of my worries.

These were the days when fashion became a health risk. Mothers started shunning Jordans, Lottos, and Diadoras, fearing their sons would come home in their socks, or not at all. Schools ran damage control, implementing uniforms and banning book bags for fear of what kids might be packing. And still the crazy reports kept filtering

through—young boys attacking their mothers or smoking each other over an accidental footprint on someone's suede Pumas.

Then the entire dialogue changed. Nationalists declared black males an officially endangered species and screamed genocide orchestrated by the invisible white hand. I was 12 and understandably short on grand theories, save one—the world had gone crazy. One day I was living for *Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors*, the next my older brother was flashing me a hot .38.

The nationalists were right about one thing. It was a white hand fueling black America's dementia—the white hand of crack cocaine. "When crack arrived in the city it increased the level of gun violence. You had lots of young people with the money to buy guns and an arms race came with that," says Peter Reuter, professor of criminology at the University of Maryland and co-author of *Drug War Heresies*. "It was no longer shootings over territory, but over transactions. The amount of money you could steal from someone was a lot larger now, and the drugs themselves made people more violent."

Crack also had the good luck to arrive in cities just as the rust belts were completely eroding employment. Whereas once a man could support his family with a job at the plant, manufacturing was being phased out by automation and the factories' retreat from the cities. Add Reagan's and then Bush's neo-conservative attack on social programs, and you have the ingredients of an epidemic.

"This is the Reagan/Bush era, when you have massive social disinvestments in schools, and in urban areas altogether," says Robin Kelley, professor of history and Africana studies at NYU. "Reagan cut back significant amounts of social funding in urban areas and expanded the police force. Playgrounds, community centers were no longer getting funded and they were disappearing."

While experts opined on the damage wrought on urban communities, gangsta rap laid out the new reality for the young. "PSK" was the foreshadowing. But when KRS-One growled his murderous vocals over a pulsing bassline ("Knew a drug dealer by the name of Peter/Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter") and then N.W.A's "Dopeman" hit with its high whistle and crashing drums, a new age in black urban America was ushered in.

Initially, gangsta rap's interpretation of the times was complex. Some acts reveled in the image of boys gone wild, while others

deplored the effects of crack on their communities. Most early gangsta rappers, and some of the best (Scarface comes to mind) lived somewhere in between. What was made clear by all gangsta rappers, however, was that the life of crime was becoming a far more appealing career track than flipping burgers.

Harry Holzer, professor of public policy at Georgetown, was involved in a 10-year survey of attitudes among black males toward employment. In 1979, as the manufacturing decline set in, the researchers asked black men whether they had a better chance making a living illegally or legally. Sixty percent preferred to stay straight. When Holzer's team asked the same question again in 1989, the number fell to 40 percent. However hyperbolically, N.W.A's classic *Straight Outta Compton*, released the year before, reflected this trend.

"Think of a world where people make a choice between work in the legal sector and work in the illegal sector, and make it on monetary concerns and whatever risk they might encounter," says Holzer. "What happened was that the labor market for less educated African American men really disintegrated. The legal sector became less and less attractive, and then with the crack boom, the illegal sector became more attractive. Then there was the glamour. Early on you saw this wholesale shift."

The brilliance of gangsta rap was in how it embodied that shift. *Straight Outta Compton*'s frantic ambience and the sparseness of *Criminal Minded* translated the chaotic and impoverished conditions of black Americans into sound. And their lyrics outlined the changes that were enveloping the community.

The form was most moving when it eschewed shock tactics that haunted it from day one, in favor of bleak, candid shots. Ice Cube's "A Bird in the Hand" was a detailed account of why, for black men, the illegal sector so often trumped the legal one. His "Alive on Arrival," about bleeding to death in the emergency room, presaged the health-care debates of the '90s, while "My Summer Vacation" humorously examined the exportation of gang culture nationwide. Ditto for Biggie. At its best, his seething debut *Ready to Die* bleeds pathos and tragedy. "Things Done Changed" defined the schism between civil-rights-movement African Americans and their cracked-out progeny. Equally astute was Nas's *Illmatic*, which

shunned all urges toward didacticism or shock, instead opting for a wide-angle view of the Queensbridge projects. "NY State of Mind," Memory Lane," and "One Love" constitute a stark and striking black-and-white photo album of Nas's black America.

"Gangsta rap was a critique of ghetto life. So much of it was about turning the cameras on crime and violence and the police," says Kelley. "It wasn't meant to be any kind of uplift narrative. It was a form of reportage—turning the mirror back on the black community."

But as the '90s wore on, and MTV noticed the big dollars generated by gangsta rappers and their associates, the mirror began to crack. Ice Cube faded into Mack 10, Biggie was replaced by the LOX, and Nas gave way to Nastradamus. As the music became more popular, it became more of a cartoon—eventually, the only cartoon in town. Despite an occasional hit by the Roots or Talib Kweli, the popular face of rap has been defined by acts in the mold of Biggie or Tupac, but with less talent and almost no perspective.

Perhaps worse, the music has devolved into a misleading caricature of the world it claims as inspiration—the streets. Crack isn't nearly the force that it was in the late '80s and early '90s. "Very few people have started using crack in the last 15 years," says Reuter. "Now you have older, sadder crack buyers, less violent, unable to hold a job, and involved with a lot of property crime."

The consequences of crack's rampage still haunt the communities it once infested. But the epidemic is over. "Basically you can think of this like a regular epidemic," says Reuter. "At first people want to try it. Some go and use it regularly, and become negative role models. After two or three years it was clear that crack was a very nasty drug, and all you are left with are the people who first started using it."

The decline of crack has brought an attendant decline in the murder rate among the population at large, and African Americans in particular. In 1991, 50.4 African Americans per 100,000 were killed. By 2000, that number had halved itself. Actual murders committed by young black males dropped from 244.1 per 100,000 youths in 1993 to 67.3 in 1999.

* * *

The sunset looks beautiful over the projects/What a shame, it ain't the same where we stand at/If you look close you can see the bricks chipped off/Sometimes niggas miss when they lick off

—MOBB DEEP, "STREETS RAISED ME"

None of this means urban black America is experiencing a renaissance. During the '90s the fortunes of almost every segment of society were buoyed by the surging economy. Welfare reform, a frequent and sometimes deserving target of criticism from the left, sent poor women back into the job market in droves. At the same time, Clinton-era programs, such as the expansion of the earned income tax credit, lightened the load of the country's working poor. Only one group seemed to miss the gravy train—young black men, gangsta rap's original constituency.

Over the past two decades, black America made impressive gains in the job and education sector—or anyway, half of black America did. In a study of young, "less educated" African Americans with only a high school diploma, Holzer and his partner Paul Offner discovered that the employment rate for women rose from 37 percent in 1989 to 52 percent in 2000. The rate actually fell for men, from 62 percent to 52 percent. According to Holzer, in the 16–24 age range there is actually a higher percentage of black women employed than black men—a stunning statistic, given that many black women in this demographic are also unwed mothers.

Why hasn't gangsta rap morphed to address the new reality of African American men? In short, because the narrative of today's black man makes a lousy cowboy flick. A central element of gangsta rap was the lionizing of drug dealers as cool, smooth black males fighting their way out of the ghetto. Although the portrayal was highly exaggerated, it definitely wasn't a complete fantasy—the drug trade did produce a few legitimate entrepreneurs. But no amount of hyperbole could salvage the current narrative of the black male—that of the habitual loser.

Gangsta rappers and their advocates argue that they are simply doing what other artists do in emphasizing certain elements of their world. "It's drama, and in drama you take the mundane elements of life and you infuse them at times with hyperbolic meaning," says Todd Boyd, professor of critical studies at the University of South-

ern California. "When people look at *Scarface* they don't criticize the film because it overly dramatizes Tony Montana's cocaine use. In reality, if anyone snorted that much cocaine, they would be dead in five minutes, but nobody applies that same standard to hip-hop. That doesn't make it any less authentic. It's not reality, it's a representation of reality from one individual's perspective."

Increasingly, that perspective is skewed. It sounds more like mythology cobbled together from a few shreds of personal experience and a lot of Donald Goines, Biggie Smalls, and *GoodFellas*. For sure, the violence that rappers love to harp on still happens—the murder rate among black men remains several times higher than that of white men. But MCs conveniently ignore less glamorous forms of violence that exert as much, if not greater, influence on their lives.

A true narrative of "the streets" and the black men who inhabit them would depict a deadbeat ex-con, fleeing mounting child support, unable to find work, and disconnected from the lives of his kids. It would chronicle his gradual slide off the American radar even as his mother, daughter, and girlfriend (not wife) make inroads. It's a story that doesn't lend itself to romance. More importantly, it doesn't fit the image of black men in the American imagination.

White America has always had a perverse fascination with the idea of black males as violent and sexually insatiable animals. A prime source of racism's emotional energy was an obsession with protecting white women from black brutes. Since the days of *Birth of a Nation* up through *Native Son* and now with gangsta rap, whites have always been loyal patrons of such imagery, drawn to the visceral fear factor and antisocial fantasies generated by black men. Less appreciated is the extent to which African Americans have bought into this idea. At least since the era of blaxploitation, the African American male has taken pride in his depiction as the quintessential man in the black hat. It is a desperate gambit by a group deprived of real power—even on our worst days, we can still scare the shit out of white suburbanites.

"These are the corporate-made images," says Kelley. "It's not that the image is new, it's an image that always sold, this idea of a dominant black man—they are violent, they are out of control. But

we've established that a lot of these narratives are just made up from Italian gangster movies."

The narrative of the post-crack era black male—poor, unemployable, and long resigned—is a direct challenge to that mythology. The inglorious plight of the black male is a disturbing reality that might make for compelling art. But for the record industry, that's a nonstarter.

Too bad. Because those few exceptions to this rule offer a glimmer of what post-gangsta hip-hop could look like. OutKast began as gangsta rap but evolved with the times and came up gold with—among other gems—"Ms. Jackson," which brilliantly evokes the complexities of black America's skyrocketing rate of out-of-wedlock births. Or think of Andre 3000's verse in the Grammy-winning "Whole World." Instead of clichéd crack dealers, Dre shouts out laid-off airport workers.

OutKast is a platinum act several times over, but rappers pledging loyalty to "the streets" have been uninclined to follow suit and observe the ghetto through an honest lens. What they do instead is live out an overblown stereotype. That such an image has little resemblance to reality is irrelevant. The image of black men that sells to the rest of America wasn't mapped out by Biggie Smalls, but Bigger Thomas.