

# TALK SHIT, GET SHOT: BODY COUNT, BLACK MASCULINITY, AND METAL MUSIC CULTURE

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## Abstract

In “Talk Shit, Get Shot,” Ice-T becomes a Signifyin(g) gangsta, doling out the violence he is expected to enact. Ice-T and his crew turn their gaze – and their guns – toward whiteness, revealing middle-class whiteness as an identity of disconnected and solipsistic alienation. I read his frustrations with hipsters, corporate executives, and middle-class Junior Leaguers as a concern that each of these groups are misguided in their targets, manipulated by the political class. Significantly, Ice-T chooses metal music to express his rage.

## Talk Shit, Get Shot

“In the jungle, masculinity is at a premium. Anybody weaker than the next man will be victimized by the stronger . . . In the ‘hood, violence and even murder become something honorable. . . Your ranking system ain’t based on what you got because you ain’t got nothing. It’s based on who you are.” Ice-T (1994: 10-11)

Body Count’s video for “Talk Shit Get Shot” opens with a scene in a bodega (neighborhood convenience store) in which three young black men participate in a friendly session of “talking shit,” amicably criticizing each other’s fashion choices. One of the young men is dressed in recognizably hip hop gear: a backward-turned baseball cap, oversized shorts, and “low top” Timberland boots, which has drawn the attention of his companions. Spotting a tweet on his cellphone announcing the release of the new Body Count recording, he blurts out, “Oh, shit, nigga, Body Count is back. And I hate them niggas. Don’t nobody give a fuck about heavy metal. Nigga, all we listen to in these streets is Drake, Drake, Drake!” pounding his hand on a nearby shelf for emphasis. Continuing with his tirade, he says, “Let me tweet this shit. Body Count is back. Hash tag who the fuck cares? Hash tag Ice-T. Hash tag nigga, I prefer lemonade.” As his two companions laugh, he continues, “Nigga, I’m gonna give some new names for this shit. Fuckin’ hash tag body *bitch!* ‘Cause they bitches. More like, body *odor*. Niggas prob’ly stink. Send this shit right now. Bam! What he gonna do? What he gonna do to *me?*”

As soon as he sends his message, the phone begins malfunctioning. Ice-T appears on his cellphone screen and as the hip hop “head” wonders, “Aye, what the fuck is this?!” Ice-T reaches out of the phone’s screen, grabs our young friend by the neck, and pulls him into the screen. As his companions hurriedly exit the bodega in an effort to avoid the same fate, the Body Count logo shifts into focus as the song proper begins. Our young friend is now strapped into a chair, forced to listen to Body Count as the metal audience moshes around him. Shot in black and white with a pointed use of the color red, we also join

Ice-T and his crew rolling through the streets of a gentrifying Brooklyn, which frames the targets of his crew.

The first victim is a hipster wearing a t-shirt proclaiming “Vegan,” skateboarding past a graffitied wall. Rolling his eyes at the same tweet on his cellphone that the hip hop fan had seen – “Body Count is back!!!!” – and nodding understandingly at the “#FuckBodyCount” riposte, Ice-T and his crew roll past in their black van with the side door open. Faces hidden by bandanas drawn over their noses and chins, they raise pointed guns at the hipster, firing on him and leaving him for dead. The same fate occurs to a white middle-class businessman who bumps into one of Ice-T’s crew on the sidewalk and angrily turns on the young black man, only to get “capped” (killed) with a drawn handgun. In a subsequent scene, two matrons sit drinking wine at an outdoor café – another sign of a gentrifying post-industrial neighborhood – one of whom is seen at her laptop, watching a Body Count performance. Visibly sickened by the video, she turns to a website for M.A.M., Mothers Against Metal, to write, “Body Count must be stopped.” The black van stops in front of the café and two crew members jump out of the back, guns blazing, leaving a trail of blood and spilled wine. As the guitar solo ends the video before a final, “Talk shit, get shot!” Ice-T and his crew are seen running away from a police vehicle.

Throughout the video, Body Count gets taken to task by a variety of individuals: a black hip hop fan does not recognize Body Count as “authentically” black; a white hipster is no fan of metal, let alone a band that hasn’t released a recording in over six years and isn’t “important” or “cool”; a white male executive, empowered by his white male privilege, dismisses metal musicians and blacks altogether; and a white middle class woman is revealed to be a “M.A.M.,” a “Mother Against Metal,” evoking Tipper Gore’s Parents Music Resource Center and the moral panic that ensued on the release of Body Count’s 1992 single, “Cop Killer.” It mattered little that Ice-T was inspired by the Talking Heads’ “Psycho Killer” and it is more than ironic that the Talking Heads received critical acclaim rather than public opprobrium for their song indicating the difference in reception between a white and black musician assuming a killer’s perspective. Additionally, the racialization of metal music as a white-identified genre opens the band up to attacks from both sides of the color line. Against these images, Ice-T strikes an unapologetically confrontational stance, with lyrics that begin and end with the title, “Talk shit, get shot.”

### **Black hypermasculinity**

An over-the-top performance of the “bad nigger” trope, Ice-T and his band, Body Count, declare themselves back. The “bad nigger” idea has been expressed in folk tales such as Stagolee (Stagger Lee) about a nineteenth century black demimonde figure and represents urban black masculinity as innately violent and prone to criminality (Lott 1995; Floyd 1995; hooks 1994; Levine 1977). However, Stagolee was celebrated in black communities as a figure of black masculine agency in a time when black lives in the United States were circumscribed by legal and extralegal means (Kelley 1996; Floyd 1995; Levine 1977). We can see this double meaning in Ice-T’s agenda. He is not merely giving in to longstanding tropes of black hypermasculinity (Collins 2004), he is also asserting its value in today’s “pussyfication of the male sex,” as he describes it in an interview with *The Guardian*’s Paul Lester. Claiming that Body Count acts in ways that “you wish you could do but you can’t,” Ice-T underlines the fantastical role he is playing in the band by asserting, “Violence is a release. I don’t know if you have to act it out . . . When somebody crosses you, you imagine killing them. You don’t want to do it, but that’s just where our

brain goes. We're animals." Later, he confesses, "I'm playing videogames and I'm whacking shit; I'm not going to really go hurt somebody, no, but it's like a release valve." The vegan hipster is a part of the "pussyfication," as he sees it: "Yeah, well, I'm trying to eat a fuckin' ham sandwich and he's telling me the pork is going to kill me and I'm like, the only way the pork is going to kill me is if you figure a way to shoot it out of a gun" (all quotes this paragraph from Lester, 2014: n.p.). Like an unreconstructed hyper(hetero)sexualized male, Ice-T dismisses the long-term effects of, for example, eating pork (not to mention the effects of factory pork production), displaying a willfully ignorant stance that is partly ironic and comic but fully conscious of its performative excess.

Arguably, Ice-T's performance of black hypermasculinity adheres to a long history of (mis)representations of black masculinity that can be traced at least as far back as blackface minstrelsy with its zip coon figures – razor blade-wielding urban dandies who indulged in excessive appetites for wine, women, and song and demanded respect through violence. Replacing razor blades with automatic weaponry, this vision of black hypermasculinity continues to resonate in contemporary popular culture. Ice-T's reappropriation of this stereotype, however, might not serve as a model of embarrassing overreach, as was the zip coon figure with his malapropism-filled stump speeches and ill-suited penchant for sartorial excess, but, rather, might better serve as a figure of sub-altern authority, calling into question bourgeois notions of propriety as well as black concerns about authenticity.

Historian Robin D.G. Kelley notes that sociologists have long read the "dangerous" urban black male as "authentically black," writing, "The 'real Negroes' were the young jobless men hanging out on the corner passing the bottle, the brothers with the nastiest verbal repertoire, the pimps and hustlers, and the single mothers who raised streetwise kids who began cursing before they could walk" (Kelley, 1997: 20). Due to this bias in researchers, the overwhelming majority of residents of black neighborhoods – solid, working class men and women who helped keep the larger urban environment functioning through their labor – were never represented in the social science literature of the time.

While Ice-T exploits the conception of "real niggas" as members of the urban underclass as described by Kelley and the social science literature, he also mocks it by performing a hyperbolic version of the "gangsta" and challenges its representative figuration by performing heavy metal – one of the "whitest" of rock styles – and turning on one of the oldest stereotypes regarding black males, namely, their propensity for violence. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "Like their female counterparts, men of African descent were also perceived to have excess sexual appetite, yet with a disturbing additional feature, a predilection for violence. In this context, the 'White heroes' of Western Europe and the United States became constructed in relation to the 'Black beasts of Africa'" (Collins, 2004: 32). Black males, in other words, are "beyond the pale," cast out of civilization's hallowed – or, as in Ice-T's video, gentrified – halls, a fearsome mob reveling in their debauchery in the streets and for which political and elite power must necessarily police and constrain.

Coopting the trope of the "bad nigger," Ice-T becomes a Signifyin(g) gangsta, doling out the violence he is expected to enact (Gates 2014 [1988]; Floyd 1995). However, rather than giving in to the relentless media coverage of black-on-black violence, Ice-T and his crew turn their gaze – and their guns – toward whiteness. Playing with the same kind of ironic distillation of "bad niggers," the video's white representatives are hyper-versions of iconic whiteness:

the skateboarding, vegan T-shirt-wearing hipster, glued to his smartphone with earbuds shutting out the rest of the world; an overweight business executive speaking to his attractive female junior executive, another signifier of a transforming world; and two middle-class matrons, oblivious to their privilege, which cocoons and alienates them from those outside their social class, sustaining their paranoia of spectral monsters promoted by sensationalist media. Middle-class whiteness is revealed as an identity of disconnected and solipsistic alienation, victimizing as well as entitling holders of white privilege.

Fronting an all-black metal band, Ice-T assumes an antagonistic stance simultaneously toward middle-class aspirations and black naysayers alike. Yet, as the conclusion to the video reveals, he and his crew remain powerless before systemic, statist oppression as articulated through the police. His challenges, then, assume more than an ironic hypermasculinist critique of bourgeois respectability and black authenticity but speak to larger systemic sources of violence, symbolic, historical, and physical. Are his attacks on hipsters, both black and white, the corporate class, and political correctness mere proxy battles for the “real enemy” as represented by the squad car, a powerful presence lurking behind all the others and from which even Body Count risks “getting shot”?

### **(White) metal rage, black (metal) rage**

I read his frustrations with hipsters, corporate executives, and middle-class Junior Leaguers as a concern that each of these groups are misguided in their targets, willing dupes holding onto ideological blind spots that are exploited in a divide-and-conquer scenario manipulated by the political class, the arbiters of actual systemic subjugation. His disappointment that they see him as the enemy rather than larger institutionalized agents of surveillance and disciplining, to borrow from Foucault, fuels his antagonisms. This becomes more apparent on the track, “Pop Bubble,” another track from *Manslaughter*, in which Ice-T with guest vocalist, Jamey Jasta, rail against other artists, “so-called hardcore motherfuckers,” who live in a “pop bubble” that is not real. Ice-T calls out their lies – they really haven’t achieved the level of material success that they brag about in their songs – but worse, they have forsaken their ideals in their chase for popular acclaim and economic success, which nevertheless elude them. As Ice-T raps in the song, “Guys have gone from fight the power to what does Kim Kardashian have on today?” He misses Public Enemy and Rage Against the Machine, two bands on “opposite” genres of the popular music spectrum yet sharing a political awareness that Ice-T accuses contemporary popular music of neglecting (he seems to be addressing rap artists rather than heavy metal musicians, for the most part, though it touches on a familiar discourse about value in popular music studies).

Ice-T was asked about being a black rocker in an interview with Bay Area Magazine. He cited history in response: “You know, black people invented rock & roll. When you go back to Chuck Berry and Little Richard, Fats [Domino], and all those cats, that’s where it came from, black people” (Mapp: n.p.). Recognizing black musicians’ role in developing rock and roll, Ice-T views his interest in metal as crossracial outreach: “We got accepted early in the [rock] game by all the big bands, and every day, I stand in front of thousands of fans – most of them white – and they love it. So I’m just proud to be out there, breaking down walls” (Mapp: n.p.).

As a victim of stereotype and presumed pathological maladjustment, Ice-T has learned to withhold judgment until meeting an individual musician. In *The Ice Opinion*, he describes touring with Guns’n’Roses and Metallica: “If Axl Rose

says ‘nigger’ on a record, does that make him a racist? . . . Before I met Axl, everybody just assumed I would hate him . . . When I did finally meet Axl Rose, he was the coolest dude . . . He asked me directly, ‘How many people do you think know me, man? I mean know me, kick it with me? There’s nobody (Ice-T, 1994: 141). According to Ice-T, Rose confessed, “The promoters didn’t want Body Count to come out here on this tour. I wanted Body Count to come out on tour” . . . [Rose] asked me, ‘How am I supposed to be racist if [guitarist] Slash is black?’ (Ice-T, 1994: 142).

It was not all cross-racial harmony on the tour, however: “The lead singer of Metallica, James Hetfield, the dude *Rolling Stone* called the ‘Leader of the Real Free World,’ that dude . . . put out a real ill vibe to all my guys when we toured with Guns’n’Roses and Metallica. Yeah, homeboy right there, he has a trip. Kirk Hammett, the lead guitar player, and Lars Ulrich, the drummer, are totally cool” (Ice-T, 1994: 142).

Tellingly, unlike the white victims in the video, Ice-T does not shoot the black hip hop fan but keeps him strapped into a chair, forcing him to listen to Body Count’s metal song, in an effort to educate, perhaps, rather than eradicate. The appearance of an Afrika Bambaata-like character in the audience toward the end of the video provides further plausible indication of Ice-T’s influences or alliances. Afrika Bambaata (né Kevin Donovan), an icon of early hip-hop’s progressive aspirations was a former gang member of the Black Spades, helping to expand it into one of the largest and most notorious of New York City gangs by the early 1970s. On returning from a trip to Africa, Bambaata left the gang to form the inclusive pluralistic Universal Zulu Nation (UZN), an organization that curated cultural events, becoming one of the major influences on early hip hop culture.

Importantly, just as Bambaata actively crossed racial lines in recruiting members of the UZN, Ice-T explicitly crossed generic color lines. Ice-T elaborated on his formation of Body Count in *The Ice Opinion*:

After *Original Gangster* [Ice-T’s fourth recording released in 1991, which featured Body Count but is considered a hip hop recording], we were really rolling, so we decided to go all out and come out with this group called Body Count. Now Body Count, for those of you who aren’t slaves to the press, is a rock group, not a rap group. Body Count was created because I like rock music. *I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to like rock music.* I’ve been listening to rock music my whole life – Black Sabbath, Blue Oyster Cult, Deep Purple, Black Flag, Circle Jerks, X. I moved into Minor Threat. I listened to No Means No, Cannibal Corpse, Gwar. I was into this whole shit. *I liked rock because I like the rage I got out of it.* I found rage in Slayer and Megadeth, and used the same rage to make my music. (Ice-T, 1994: 99, added emphasis)

I would like to stay with Ice-T’s invocation of “the rage” he heard in rock music. Contrasting this sensibility against contemporary R&B, which he dismisses as “just ‘Shake that ass. Shake that ass. Shake that ass’” (Ice-T, 1994: 100). Ice-T thought of the name Body Count for the band after listening to Sunday night news reports on Los Angeles television in which “newscasters would tally up the youths killed in gang homicides that week and then just segue to sports. ‘Is this all I am,’ I thought, ‘a body count?’” (Ice-T, 1994: 100). While affect theorists tend to note its community-building properties (even if only temporarily during a performance) or the ways in which emotive response may catalyze broader social effects, it is less common to note how the affect of darker emo-

tions such as rage might also produce an engaged aesthetic in addition to *non-pathological* social relations. The rage Ice-T heard in the music of Slayer and Megadeth did not turn him into a cop killer; rather, he transformed his rage as a musical response to, for example, the acts of police brutality that remains a pertinent issue for impoverished communities of color in the United States.

As the video for “Talk Shit, Get Shot” suggests, the real, read actual, source of fear for vegan hipsters, middle-aged middle class white-collar workers and their wine-clubbing spouses should be the ever-present arm of state violence as represented by the police car. Power’s bureaucratic facelessness is indicated by the inability to see into the police car to see the actual individuals wielding state power and its ubiquity is demonstrated by its four-wheeled mobility and, by extension, the surveillance cameras that might be conjured by the video itself, ably recording the murderous rampage of Ice-T’s crew and the movements of their black van. Welcome to the Panoptical Matrix Terrordome, indeed.

This final scene reveals the ironic and hyperbolic nature of the preceding scenes: Ice-T and his crew are first shown walking slowly towards the viewer, matching the viewers’ gaze with their own steady, concentrated focus. The image reinforces the “act hard” personas of the previous few minutes yet as soon as the squad car turns onto their street behind them, Ice-T and his crew begin to run and scatter as the video comes to an end. Their “acting hard” is exactly that – an act, a performative gesture of symbolic violence as musically realized through contemporary metal’s sonic and Signifyin(g) codes: compressed, distorted guitars and drums; velocity; a relentless centrality to the defining riff; black leather gear; a band logo rendered in appropriately “medieval” script. As I theorize elsewhere (Fellezs, in press), metal mosh pits demonstrate the calculated nature of metal violence as participants gauge their moshing to inflict the least pain possible while simultaneously abandoning themselves to the sheer pleasure of physical release as a body in motion, losing themselves in their metal musicking.

### **Conclusion or run up motherfucker**

In the end, however, what, exactly, does Body Count accomplish? Is it all just a catalyzing performance, a grindhouse/funhouse experience, as Ice-T claims? In an interview with Dan Reilly, Ice-T insists, “You gotta get the joke. If you don’t get the joke, this shit is gonna scare the shit out of you . . . you’re supposed to have fun because it’s entertainment. It’s not like I’m a death metal band that wants you to believe that I really want to kill God.” When compared to Burzum, Ice-T declares, “That’s black metal. I’ve hung out with those motherfuckers. They think they’re Vikings and shit. *That’s not what we’re doing.* We’re doing some rock, some fun, some serious shit. You either get it or you don’t” (Reilly, 2014: n.p., added emphasis).

Ice-T may simply trying to avoid the controversy he stirred up with “Cop Killer,” the 1992 single from the debut Body Count recording. The debut record was eventually re-released without the offending track, which was given away free. In recent retellings of the controversy, Ice-T claims full agency – “I made the decision to pull ‘Cop Killer’ from the recording” – and cites wanting to nullify the song’s notoriety in the interest of increasing the recording’s sales. Claiming that controversy does not, in fact, sell recordings, Ice-T recounts his troubles as the travails of a man hunted for a song.

While the post facto narrative may be self-serving, it reveals an interesting facet of Ice-T's public persona. Despite proudly proclaiming a tough street cred upon which his career largely rests, Ice-T willingly acquiesces to bourgeois concerns regarding propriety, even if only to considerations of crossover appeal and economic gain. However, his assertion that he quickly learned that the police form the largest legal "gang" sounds not so much like a worried entrepreneur interested in moving more product but more a disempowered individual facing the strong arm (tentacles?) of state policing and violence.

In his autobiography, Ice-T writes, "When I yelled 'Cop Killer,' I did not prepare for the fallout. I'd been dissing rappers for years; they didn't do shit. Then I dissed the cops – *and they came after me like no gang I've ever encountered*. Then Charlton Heston, Tipper Gore, and the President of the United States himself came after me" (Ice-T, 2012: 144, added emphasis). Citing tax audits by the Internal Revenue Service, security checks by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Secret Service, among other actions, including "snatching" his daughter "out of school [to ask] her if [he] was a member of any paramilitary organizations" (Ice-T, 2012: 145), Ice-T realized he was also bringing unwanted political pressure on his record label at the time, Warner Bros., and, consequently, his recordings would not receive any real promotional support. As he testifies, "A lot of folks get it twisted, but this is the deal: Time Warner was just looking out for itself. And I respected that. I still respect that. They never treated me like shit, never got mad or yelled at me. All those theories you still hear today – Time Warner sold Ice down the river – hell naw [no]. They didn't! It was just a *gang* of political and financial pressure" (Ice-T, 2012: 148, original emphasis).

Ice-T battles both sides of the color line throughout the "Talk Shit, Get Shot" video. Similarly, Ice-T was not only confronted by Time Warner and the US federal government, he was also challenged by his brothers and sisters in the rap game: "As far as the hip hop world was concerned, I went from being a guy who was standing up for freedom of expression to being some weak-kneed motherfucker who wouldn't speak truth to power. But to me, the key to winning the game is: Don't worry about *everyone*. Find out who's really on your team and then roll with them" (Ice-T, 2012: 149, original emphasis). As Ice-T concludes at the end of his narrative of the "Cop Killer" controversy, "That was some stressful, hectic shit. That was heat coming from the *government* of the United States. I was in quicksand for months. There was no safe ground to stand on" (Ice-T, 2012: 149, original emphasis).

Certainly, the hypermasculinist version of the "bad nigger" Ice-T portrays, then, mobilizes a cathartic, agentive counternarrative to being caught in the "quicksand" of racialized hypersurveillance by a government alarmed by a song produced by a heavy metal band consisting of Black Americans. In combining the histories of white fear of and fascination for black masculinity to bourgeois apprehension of many of the themes prevalent, even celebrated, in heavy metal (e.g., anti-authoritarianism, hyperindividualism), might Ice-T also be demonstrating the limits of using hypermasculinized, hyper-racialized, individualist tropes in challenging hegemonic power?

As a concluding piece of evidence demonstrating the long reach of state power against individualist limits, we should recall that it took *over two decades* before Ice-T responded to his critics, finally getting in a "last word" against hipster critics, corporate executives, and PMRC-like censors as an established tele-

vision and music star and becoming a teacher to young black men as the relationship with the young hip-hop fan suggests.

Talk shit, get shot, then, is a more complicated response than its succinct vernacular pithiness might indicate at first glance. Indeed, when you have nothing, declaring “who you are” means that you just might get shot. I have been arguing that it is significant that Ice-T chose his metal band, Body Count, to articulate his rage – rather than, say, his gangsta rap persona – despite his seeming disempowerment in the face of state power and violence. Be ready to shoot, run, or get shot. Similar to the metal bands Ice-T cites as inspiration and the ‘hood ethos he describes in the essay’s epigraph, the ability to speak back to power means becoming something more than merely a bad nigger talking shit or a sonically-marked target of an increasingly paranoid surveillance state – it means becoming a speaker of truth to power, a witness to state violence, and a corrective to the idea that (merely) performing these acts will result in “the revolution.”

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