

Leonard, David. "Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House Near You: Demonization, Commodification, and Policing Blackness." The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto. Ed. Nate Garrelts. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007. 49-69.

Game." *West Australian Government Website*. 2004. 18 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.media-statements.wa.gov.au/media/media.nsf/d3ea7b6c70acaac48256a7300318397/01287fa29e4380548256f1e00257ea6?OpenDocument>>.

Ruddock, Phillip. "Mashup Computer Game Referred For Review." Department of Federal Attorney General. 2004. 23 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.offc.gov.au/resource.html?resource=334&filename=334.pdf>>.

Setton-Green, Julian. *Digital Diversions: Youth Culture in the Age of Multimedia*. London: UCL P, 1988.

Tamborini, Ron. et al. "Violent Virtual Video Games And Hostile Thoughts." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48.3 (2004): 335-350.

Zillmann, Dolf and James B. Weaver. "Effects Of Prolonged Exposure To Gratuitous Media Violence On Provoked And Unprovoked Hostile Behavior." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 29 (1999): 145-165.

3. Virtual Gangstas, Coming to a Suburban House Near You: Demonization, Commodification, and Policing Blackness

DAVID LEONARD

While video games grew in popularity for several years, the release of *Grand Theft Auto III* (GTA3) in 2001 propelled the industry to new heights, resulting in several copycat games, including the game sequels *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (GTA:VC) and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (GTA:SA). While much has been made of the violent and sexual nature of this series, there has been little public debate or outcry regarding the racialized content of these games. Instead of condemning their promotion of stereotypes and the promotion of racialized state violence, which compared to the inclusion of sex and violence gamers have no power in determining levels of participation, the likes of Hillary Clinton and David Walsh have denounced the series as a moral pollutant necessitating governmental action. It is in this context that this chapter explores the societal reaction to both *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, in terms of both political discourses and those of gamers. By examining online discussion groups, fan commentary, and political speeches (including those from elected and unelected "leaders") this chapter seeks to generate thoughts about the racial context of these games, generating insight as to how race contributes to both the societal condemnation and widespread popularity of these games and the racialized bodies that inhabit these virtual ghetto spaces.

Focusing on the racial content of these discourses, this chapter addi-

tionally makes note of the ways in which new racism defines yet simultaneously emanates from this discursive field. While offering some discussion of the ways in which these games deploy longstanding racialized stereotypes, how they offer primarily white suburbanites the opportunity to experience America's dangerous ghettos, and how they sanction and legitimize state violence, our focus here lends itself to the reactions—outrage and pleasure—of both cultural pundits/politicians and gamers, of both those who decry these games as a dangerous threat to children and those who celebrate these offerings of virtual reality as transgressive and even potentially oppositional, in the end demonstrating the centrality of race and violence within both discursive fields.

Dr. Dre once stated that "People in the suburbs, they can't go to the ghetto, so they like to hear what's goin' on. Everyone wants to be down." bell hooks, in *Outlaw Culture*, complicates this idea, situating processes of commodification, fetish and the pimping of a corporate ghetto-centric imagination, arguing that "the desire to be 'down' has promoted a conservative appropriation of specific aspects of underclass black life, who in reality is dehumanized via a process of commodification wherein no correlation is made between mainstream hedonistic consumerism and the reproduction of a social system that perpetuates and maintains an underclass" (152). Using such arguments of the basis of inquiry into the Grand Theft Auto series (most specifically *GTA:SA*), this chapter explores the ways in which the reaction, where race is explicitly absent yet central, legitimizes a conservative project that maintains a permanent underclass, whether in gamers' internet discussions about the games, political rhetoric condemning the message of the game, or the consumptive pleasure derived from a ghetto existence that rarely penetrates American consciousness.

Do You Know What Your Children Are Watching? Just Say No to Virtual Gangstas

The release of *GTA:SA* in fall 2004 not only promoted lengthy waitlists at Amazon.com, release parties throughout the nation, and ample online discussions, but an infrequent level of unity in Washington D.C. and in state capitals throughout the United States. During the subsequent six months, the calls for governmental intervention and legislative regulation over the content available within virtual gaming grew louder, especially after reports of the "hot coffee modification," which allowed players to simulate sex with naked women during *GTA:SA* play. In introducing the Family Entertainment Protection Act, Hillary Clin-

ton (D-NY) called upon the government "to make sure their kids can't walk into a store and buy a video game that has graphic, violent, and pornographic content." Joseph Liebermann (D-CT) concurred, emphasizing the importance of protecting children from "a silent epidemic of media desensitification" and "for stealing the innocence of our children" (McCullagh; Loughrey; Sweeting), pointing to the dangers of violent and overly sexualized games:

There is a growing body of evidence that points to a link between violent video games and aggressive behavior in children. We are not interested in censoring video games meant for adult entertainment but we do want to ensure that these video games are not purchased by minors. Our bill will help accomplish this by imposing on those retailers that sell M-rated games to minors [Loughrey].

The Clinton and Liebermann legislation, which would prohibit the sale of "mature" games to anyone under the age of eighteen; order the FCC to investigate "misleading" ratings and solicit complaints about video games; and require "an annual independent analysis of game ratings," along with their successful call for an investigation into Rockstar and Grand Theft Auto as a result of "Hot Coffee" controversy, demonstrates the level of interest and outrage emanating from political circles concerning portions of the virtual gaming industry. Ted Stevens (R-AK), during hearings concerning the "decency" of computer games and television, captured the level of panic-driven anger directed at *GTA:SA* and the entire industry, all of which centers the notion of protecting America's youth (read: white middle class) from these indecent and immoral games: "America lacks the kind of moral compass the country should have for our young people" (McCullagh). In his estimation and that of Clinton, Liebermann, and a host of others from both sides of the aisle, the government had to be that compass.

Such rhetoric and the calls for legislation are neither isolated nor particular to discourses emanating from Washington D.C. From speeches on state House floors, to ample press releases, the condemnation of video games has become commonplace in recent years, as evident by the ubiquitous condemnation of *GTA:SA*. Following its release, Representative Fred Morgan (Oklahoma), reflecting the nature of the discourse and the almost obsessive focus on video games as a cultural and moral pollutant, offered the following assessment of virtual gaming in a press release that called for legislation banning particular types of games within his state:

If someone on the street offered to teach your children to decapitate their enemies, physically abuse women, and assassinate world leaders, you

would probably call the police. But when a video game manufacturer provides the same "service," many parents are actually paying for their children to get a tutorial in violence and depravity. And instead of calling the police for help in many popular games your kids will be killing police. [Morgan].

Such outrage, rhetoric, and panics have promoted efforts to regulate video games in state after state, from Illinois and California to Michigan and Pennsylvania. In Illinois, Governor Blagojevich (D-IL) led the first and most successful effort to regulate virtual reality. In fact, Governor Rod Blagojevich was the first public official to call for legislation that would make it illegal for anyone under the age of eighteen to buy violent or sexually explicit games: "This is all about protecting our children until they are old enough to protect themselves," the Governor stated in an issued statement. "There's a reason why we don't let kids smoke or drink alcohol or drive a car until they reach a certain age and level of maturity" (Slevin A08).

The trend toward governmental regulation of video game content, which has resulted in the courts overturning legislations that either restrict or seek to censor content, reflects a panic driven by a racial logic that fears the ghetto-centric imagination available within contemporary gaming. The panics concerning the effects of (ghetto-centric) video games on American (white middle-class) youth has not been limited to political officials seeking reelection and news coverage during relatively quiet times, but has found great resonance within church-based and otherwise conservative media organizations. The National Institute on Media and the Family (NIMF), led by Dr. David Walsh, has emerged as one of the most prominent critical voices directed at the video game industry. Providing "resources," reviews, and other information regarding the "appropriateness" of particular games for children, while lobbying politicians and game retailers to protect "children and teens" from "killographic" and sexual content, NIMF embodies this ongoing culture war. Others, like The Lion and Lamb Project and Mothers Against Video Game Addiction and Violence (MAVAV), have been equally instrumental in successfully pushing the issue of the effects of video games within American culture and in turn defining the nature of the discourse. For example, MAVAV recently compared playing video games to alcohol and drug abuse, working toward "educating parents" on "today's fastest and increased threat and danger to our children's health and way of life." What links together these various voices, as well as others (such as those panic-driven debates regarding the effects of video games found on numerous white nationalist websites) is not merely the reduction of video games to a pollutant on American cultural values, the threat that

both sexually-explicit and violent games pose to youth, or the reconstruction of the state as institution that is supposed to protect children, but the types of games that cause outrage, induce panics, result in anxiety, and warrant governmental/communal intervention: those inside American ghettos and allowing players to "become gangstas." It was *GTA:SA*, not even *Grand Theft Auto III*, that lead to calls for legislation. This is not a coincident and reveals much about the nature of a discourse as it was a virtual world of street gangs, drive-by shootings, and strong-armed robberies that sent America's political, moral, and cultural elites into a tizzy. While reflective of a myriad of factors, it is not surprising that *GTA3* with its celebration of an Italian mob family (see Leonard 2003) and racial tropes, never resulted in national debates and cries for governmental intervention.

In the end, it was the release of *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, *The Warriors*, *187: Ride or Die*, *Narc*, and *True Crime: Streets of LA/NY*, as well as the proposed release of *25 to Life* and *Gang Wars*, and not *America's Army*, *Socom*, or any number of war games that encourage youth to kill, destroy and maim that prompted calls for protection. It is not truly about violence, or even the affects of violent on youth, but their exposure to particular types of violence, with violence committed by gangsters and criminals, particularly those of color, who also seem to represent a disproportionate number of these characters, against the state identified as a significant threat against the moral and cultural fabric of the nation. Violence committed by the state, whether from a virtual military or police force, which tend to be overwhelmingly white within virtual reality, is certainly not a threat or dangerous to America's youth; in fact, it seems as if the discourse constructs these type of games as offering a desirable message concerning safety, security and the state, as needed to control the savages who inhabit the Third World or America's inner cities. While ignoring the racial aspects of this process, Clive Thompson describes the outrage directed toward video games as being based in the celebration of state violence as opposed to individual violence or criminality as the basis of which games receive praise and which elicit cultural panics:

Nine times out of 10, when you're blowing people's chests open with hollow-point bullets, you aren't playing as a terrorist or criminal. No, you're playing as a cop, a soldier or a special-forces agent—a member of society's forces of law and order.... Yet anti-gaming critics didn't really explode with indignation until *Grand Theft Auto III* came along.... Why weren't these detractors equally up in arms about, say, the Rainbow Six series? Because games lay bare the conservative logic that governs brutal acts. Violence—even horrible, war-crimes-level stuff—is perfectly fine as long as you commit it under the aegis of the state. If you're fighting

creepy Arabs and urban criminals, go ahead—dual-wield those Uzis, equip your frag grenades and let fly. Nobody will get much upset [Thompson].

Although Thompson offers a powerful assessment of the current discourse concerning video games, he fails to consider the racial implications here, with a vast majority of current outrage being directed toward ghetto or hip-hop (those defined by blackness) games. The Family Media Guide top 10 most violent games for 2005 includes six games which all offer gang narratives concerning inner city crime. The supposed lack of values in “those communities” reflects the focus on protecting children from ghetto violence in ways beyond formal segregation. In this scenario, inner-city kids are already lost due to their daily exposure to violence and a “culture of poverty.” This discourse ultimately reifies common-sense understandings of blackness as a source of moral indecency and cultural decay. To understand the efforts of Clinton, Lieberman or Walsh is to move beyond a focus on generational splits, geographic battles, or mere cultural/value differences. More importantly, as evidenced by varied reactions to the various installments of GTA series, the publicity afforded to the “hot coffee modification” controversy, or the questions, if not panics, afforded to the release of a wave of ghetto-centric video games, demonstrates the racial nature of panics, that public displays of blackness, that the presumed opportunity to “become” a black thug or visit America’s ghettos, fulfill longstanding fears of black sexuality, physically, and violence, contributing to a particularly powerful panic centering on the affects of virtual blackness on white suburban youth. The series of moral panics that constructed these virtual ghetto-centric spectacles as transgressive, as violations of community standards, rather than commodities that not only sought to capitalize on the publicity resulting from such panics, reflects a longstanding white supremacist fears about black masculinity, sexuality, and violence.

Whether manifesting in a backlash against hip-hop, sports or television, culture is historically and ideologically specific, such panics reflect longstanding practices of fearing black and brown bodies. Herman Gray persuasively argues: “The discourses of regulation and the moral panics that they helped to mobilize worked for a time in the 1980s to consolidate a neoconservative hegemonic bloc. This bloc routinely used media images of black men and women, the poor and immigrants to represent social crisis” (24–25). In his estimation, hegemonic images, whether those emanating from popular culture or the political pulpit “became the basis for a barrage of public policies and legislation intended to shore up this hegemonic position and to calm and manage the moral panics construction around race in general and blackness in particular”

(24–25). Others have argued similarly on the intersections of fear, race, moral panics, and calls for state intervention. The signifiers of black violence and markers of black hypersexuality ubiquitously enter into public discourses as sources of consumption and scorn, as “corrupting and pathological, whether on screen or through welfare debates” (Gray 135). Within the American imagination, “what is forbidden in American culture often seems to be projected outward onto the outsider or scapegoat,” notes Joy James. “Blackness has come to represent sex and violence in the national psyche. Although they gain notoriety as the most infamous perpetrators of unrestrained criminality, African Americans are given little resignation in media, crime reports or social crusades as being victims” (127).

The ongoing questions and debates regarding the effects of *GTA:SA* on youth (read: white suburban males) and the larger questions regarding the effects of a ghetto-centric imagination on America’s cultural values and morals not only signify a generational battle, culture war, or even moral panic, but the longstanding visions of race and gender within the American cultural landscape. Herman Gray encapsulates the racial logic that informs moral panics, revealing the powerful ways which popular culture mobilizes and consolidates racialized fear in maintaining white supremacy:

So often media narratives presume and then fix in representation the purported natural affinity between black criminality and threats to the nation. By fixing the blame, legitimating the propriety of related moral panics, these representations (and the assumptions on which they are based) help form the discursive logic through which policy prescriptions for restoring order—more jails—are fashioned [25].

To him, “the production of media representations of blackness (along with those of sexuality and immigration) as threatening the natural fabric and policy prescriptions for reimagining and consolidating a traditional vision of the American nation” defines contemporary representations of blackness (Gray 25). According to this racist logic, the values and morals offered through playing *GTA:SA*, or any numbers of games pose a threat to the national fabric, just as those who inhabit those real-life communities pose an equal danger. In each case policing and surveillance are needed to protect families who reside outside of both South Central and San Andreas from the physical and cultural dangers facilitated by potential contact with blackness.

Notwithstanding the conservative and reactionary presumption that sees the *GTA* series as offering players the opportunity to kill, rape, rob or form a gang challenges the dominant cultural landscape, these games

work in concert with dominant discourses and cultural expectations. Yet, such logic is not exclusive to the haters or those who seek to regulate certain types of games, as those who celebrate GTA tend to offer similar understandings of race, difference, and Othered bodies and spaces. In their estimation, these games provide those outside of the imagined ghetto an opportunity to enjoy the controlled moral decay found within these games. The commodification and celebration—enjoyment—of these games, and their visions of blackness, is an all too common facet of the virtual gaming complex (players, designers, critics, government regulators, cultural watchdogs, etc...), which mirrors many aspects found in the panics and condemnation so prevalent over the last two years.

Celebration

Amid the widespread panicking and calls for legislation to protect America's (white middle class) youth from the violence and hyper sexuality (blackness) supplied within virtual reality, there has been a sustained voice of defense, if not celebration, of the Grand Theft Auto series, particularly *GTA:SA*, and other ghetto-centric games. If judging by sales and profit margins, it is fair to say that in both message and content, the Grand Theft Auto series has been immensely popular. By 2005, the GTA series had amassed sale numbers surpassing 44 million units. Additionally, each of the installments proved critically worthy, receiving ample awards from within the industry. In 2005, *GTA:SA* received five awards at the Golden Joystick awards, which included Play Station 2 Game of the Year. Yet, the greatest counter discourse and opposition to the efforts of Hillary Clinton and Jack Walsh has manifested on the Internet, where gamers have advocated for their right to kill, main, fuck, or behave as any good (virtual) thug might do if given the opportunity.

From gamer forums to Amazon.com, the Internet is saturated with not just efforts to defend the GTA series amid this culture war, but denunciations of the enemies of GTA, video game culture, and a virtual reality uninhabitable to a wealthy elitist older generation. While focusing on the oversensitivity of politicians and organizations like MAVAV, and the generation gap reflective of older generations not understanding a youth culture that is progressive and transcendent, several themes emerge within these online chatrooms: first off, it is just entertainment. Denying the social, political, ideological, racial, or cultural significance of the GTA series or any number of virtual gaming, exasperated gamers scoff at the alarmist rhetoric of its opposition, describing *GTA:SA* as

"harmless entertainment" and a "virtual play" space or "fantasyland" that poses no harm to society or its members. Similarly, a second prominent defense of *GTA:SA* has been to focus on the level of pleasure garnered in becoming a virtual gangsta. On Amazon.com, Frank Ponce, speaking in gleeful terms, could not contain his excitement from the possibility of becoming a gangster: "Like all the other 'Grand Theft Auto' games, this is going to be great. Only this is the ultimate game.... Playing a gangsta this time is going to be tight."

While recognizing the potential harm that comes from these games (promoting violence, demeaning women, teaching kids immorality and reinforcing stereotypes), gamer after gamer celebrated the pleasure and excitement generated from playing inside both Liberty City and San Andreas. In their estimation, their pleasure and the enjoyment of these games superseded any questions about their effect on society. Likewise, most gamers dismissed claims about the potential harm of playing this game, emphasizing over and over again that the GTA series was intended for adults. Acknowledging the potential harm on kids—white middle class kids—a vast majority of gamers called upon parents, rather than a censoring government to protect America's impressionable minds.

Moreover, much of the discourse wondered about the universality of harm on all youth—in other words, would GTA affect all youth identically? Questioning the logic that bemoans the effects of playing in San Andreas on all children, much of the online discussion focused on its potential harm on certain youth, those without parental involvement, those who already live in violent communities, those who lack morals and values, and those already likely to commit crime (read: black and poor). At this level, the culture war exists as a battle between one segment determined to protect white middle-class suburban youth from the pollutants and moral turpitude available in San Andreas or those "lessons" offered within a world dominant by hip-hop, and those who find pleasure in this world, yet simultaneously seek to protect *their* children from the cultural values offered within GTA and the dangers that define contemporary life. While these discourses seem to agree on a number of fronts—that there should be some method of shielding children from the messages of these games—the method of protection is often a bone of contention. This presumed battle, between those who think the state should be held responsible and those who take the family to task nonetheless seek the same goal of policing the imagery consumed by impressionable youth. As reflective of a new racist discourse that in spite of the increasing visibility of people of color, especially with the cultural marketplace, the efforts to police and protect these bodies and those signifiers of blackness from impressionable white youth, who because of

the increase visibility, are under siege embodies the realities of new racism.

Fourth and probably most revealing, much online discussion focused on the realism offered within these games. In other words, the criticism offered by Clinton, Lieberman, Walsh, or from MAVAV is warranted and baseless in that *GTA:SA* and *True Crime* merely attempt to capture the reality of ghetto life within contemporary America. On Amazon.com Orlando describes the game in the following terms: "The violence is real and it happens everyday, so this game cannot be seen as violent but for its realism in gang life. You see it from a perspective of a former gang banger trying to straighten his life until he is sucked back in.... This is the type of thing that happens when you grow up in a life like this." "A Gamer" concurs, focusing on the realism of the game not merely as a point of celebration, but as a response to those racist "haters."

This game is gonna be sweet, no doubt about it. But to the racist saying that it is a disappointment [because] the character is black, please shut up. Why you think Vincetti was Italian? Because it's cool to be Italian? NO! Because the game parallels a gangster's lifestyle. Now wouldn't it be a bore if he had a Minnesotan accent? Could you serious imagine a game about urban strife during the early 1990s in LA and based on movies like *Boyz n the Hood* with a white guy. Seriously. Your racism blinds your whole concept of character and setting. Please, keep your whole white victim-hood to yourself.

On Rotten Tomatoes website, "David the Black Heart," agreed, noting the realism as the reason why *GTA:SA* surpassed even the previous installments of *GTA*: "Using the 80s was much more of a novelty than a real setting so that they could please fans of *Miami Vice*. SA's use of the 90s feels infinitely more authentic and real and the story is great because it explores a lot of what street life is like. To me, ghettos and gangs are real whilst mafia themes aren't." While others focused on playing a gangsta as "innovative" and a "tight" change of pace, "A Gamer" focused on the realism of the game as to challenge those who did not want to be a black gangsta and those who question the manner of representation. In other words, don't hate the game, hate the realism that it portrays; don't denounce this virtual reality, but the reality it reflects; don't call for legislation to outlaw ghetto-centric games, work to undo the existence of ghetto inside America. Whereas some chatters wondered if the realism offered in the game resulted in an unfortunate celebration of the worst available within society (its "sewer" and "criminal elements"), Orlando and others not only dismissed critiques by citing the game's realistic portrayals of the ghetto, but noted the transformative possibilities in the *GTA* series. Calling it educational and full of profound life

lessons, Orlando clearly saw a power in learning about the ghetto from the safety of his home. While lacking time and space to fully discuss this disturbing reconstitution of *GTA:SA* as an oppositional and informative glimpse into an authentic ghetto experience, it must be noted that *GTA* erases much of what happens daily within America's ghettos, from mothers and fathers working and sons and daughters playing and going to school to families eating dinner and activist organizing against the construction of jails or other potentially dangerous structures. To claim realism is to accept the idea that America's ghetto is nothing more than war zones inhabited by lawless gangstas in need of policing, surveillance, and state control, whether through putting more cops on the street, or outlawing virtual play within ghetto spaces.

Lastly, there seems throughout these online discussions to be an effort amongst chatters, and even my students and certain academic gaming circles to celebrate *GTA* as a safe vehicle to address larger problems. Soraya Murray, for example, in her provocative, yet at times troubling celebration of virtual gaming, describes *GTA* in the following way: "For me, these depictions of urban spaces can serve as neutral zones to which to manifest more pervasive" and more "real lived social situations" (97). Praising power differentials and the ubiquity of state violence, Murray, like much of the discourse, sees a transformative and even oppositional quality within *GTA*: "Liberty City, Vice City, the streets of the staggeringly expansive state of San Andreas—these are all boundaries zones in which it becomes possible to experiment safely with extremely disorienting aspects of modern life" (97–98). Similarly, a review on Game-Brains celebrates *GTA:SA* as a "politically engaged" piece of art that "*San Andreas* presents a scathing critique of American consumer culture, the horrible social inequalities that it perpetuates, and the damage it causes to the rest of the world" ("Modding Community Gets Angry"). Like the chatter who dismissed questions about violence by suggesting the possibility of using *GTA* to thwart violence ("Detroit leads the U.S. in murder, rape, armed robbery. Most people in Detroit can't afford a PS2 and *GTA*. Detroit led the U.S. in murder, rape, armed robbery, and etc. long before video games. My idea ... give people in Detroit a PS2 to give them something to do") or Brandon, who describes *GTA:SA* as a "Fantastical virtual playground" and "a way out of the suburbs" (Yargas), the efforts to celebrate the *GTA* series and *GTA:SA* particularly in the face of criticism legitimizes dominant understandings of race, place, and state. This "way out of the suburbs" is not mere escapism, as the play of the privileged speaks to the normalization of institutional violence towards the less privileged in U.S. society. The reduction of violence within marginalized communities to individual choices devoid of societal influence

provides two key functions in the context of GTA: it justifies unquestioning consumption of racist imagery, and justifies violent state policing of America's "morally (whiteness) deficient."

State Violence and a Race-Based Critique

Amid the widespread debates about the GTA series, and particularly *GTA:SA*, as to its effects on children, and the impact of playing highly sexualized and violent games, little has been made of the racial content, particularly how these games reinforce dominant understandings of America's ghettos, blackness, and state control. As with the discussion, these games reduce America's ghettos and the bodies of color who inhabit these locales to spaces of danger and decay that necessitate state surveillance and regulation. Although the panics and celebration routinely come from outside of urban communities of color, a sustained engagement from within communities of color and other anti-racist advocates is necessary given the ways in which these games legitimize dominant racial discourses and practices. A defining characteristic of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is the ability to commit home invasion robberies, on top of the usual murders, pimping, car theft and other missions. Carl Johnson—the player-controlled character—along with your crew can sneak into "innocent people's" homes in search of goods and cash to steal. At some points in the game, home invasions allow you to sneak up on sleeping families, holding them at bay with a shotgun or another weapon of your choice. During one game playing session, Carl breaks into a house, only to find an unsuspecting white couple. As the white male resident attempts to protect his blonde wife by challenging Carl to a fight, he states: "you probably can't read." As with the rest of the game, this stand off, with Carl murdering these two individuals, further solidifies hegemonic visions of the ghetto as a war zone inhabited by black gangstas that not only prey on black residents, but those white families living outside its virtual ghetto center.

Another important element of *GTA:SA* is how this game disseminates dominant ideologies and common sense ideas of race toward the sanctioning of state violence. Beyond playing on hegemonic visions of people of color and criminality, *GTA:SA* equally deploys reactionary visions of communities of color through its narrative and virtual representations. For example, as you drive throughout and between the game's various cities, the radio not only biases a spectrum of jams, all of which further reflects the commodification of an imagined urban black aesthetic, but a series of reactionary public service announcements, which

embody a virtual moral panic and contribute to those efforts outside of this virtual urban space. Paired with the deployment of racialized images of criminality (even black cops are corrupt), dysfunctionality and danger, these radio spots highlight the game's reactionary political orientation, playing on hegemonic myths of race, class and nation. "Notice food lines are getting too long. Wonder why? 19 million illegal aliens are in this country. Most are in San Andreas." The violence and mayhem that define this virtual reality reflect the number of illegal aliens that view America as a place of handouts. Obviously playing on white supremacist mythology of immigration and welfare, such representations justify increased spending on the war against immigrants—decreasing the social welfare budget while increasing the power of the state to police borders would be productive in solving this problem. In another instance, the game reflects on the state of poverty and welfare inside this virtual America. "Those of you, who are poor, should just stop whining. Enjoy it and sit back to do what you do best: watch TV." In a third moment, a talk radio show further articulates the racist orientation of the game and its effort to link representation and state violence. Amid a talk show debate concerning immigration into San Andreas, one contributor noted how Asian immigrants were flooding the area with drugs while those from South America brought nothing since "South America has less culture than a toilet bowl." In each instance, the game gives voices to white supremacist ideologies legitimized by the game's narrative and racialized representation, sanctioning the current course of state violence. *GTA:SA* is not simply teaching kids to be violent, but eliciting consent for the ways the state enacts violence on communities of color.

While unable to provide a complete analysis of the ways in which the *GTA* series aid white supremacist discourses and practices, each of which has elided the dominant discourse, I think it is important to make mention of a key narrative element that further illustrates its sanctioning, if not promotion of state violence, that has a particular effect on communities of color. Whether participating in an urban colonial project of taking territory, or participating in random acts of virtual violence, a core element of *GTA:SA* is the murdering of people of color. While this premise is a defining character of this genre of games, *GTA:SA* elucidates the role (or lack thereof) of the state in protecting and serving communities of color. Throughout the game, the police ignore the murder of other "gang members," often intervening only in moments where violence is directed at the "innocent." In other words, Carl can, at times, kill rival gang members in front (or close to) police without consequences. Killing an innocent citizen brings the police swiftly and with the full force of the law. Furthermore, as these individuals live in the

street in virtual wait for medical attention, the paramedics rarely arrive. The murder of the innocent in the game frequently leads to not only a quick ambulance response, but also the resuscitation of these characters. *GTA:SA*, thus, concretizes hegemonic ideologies regarding criminality and the state's role in only protecting the "innocent." In reveals the nature of new racism, which celebrates the visibility and commodifiable opportunities available to people of color, even as those outside the cultural landscape and the representations within popular culture as subjected to regulation and demonization.

New Racism

While ideologies of colorblindness emanate from a spectrum of state institutions, ranging from the media to the academy, popular culture represents a crucial site in the deployment of frames of colorblindness given the ready ease of global dissemination and the increased visibility of celebrities of color (Collins; Andrews and Jackson). It has become a space worthy of celebration, whereupon American discourses pay tribute to progress and possibilities, thanking popular culture for what various individuals have described as the "browning of America," a "racing of American culture" or an "explicit darkening, blackening and coloring of American culture, at least in terms of operation" (Gray 18). In other words, popular culture does not merely embody a changed or colorblind moment for America, but is simultaneously facilitating greater advancements toward a more equitable racial politics given that popular culture breaks down barriers whether through artists or shared adoration experienced by fans. It facilitates a destruction of racial boundaries, whether with white and black youth sharing a love of hip-hop, various communities learning about one another through television and films, or the virtual travels that come through video games. Serving as evidence for racial progress given the popularity of celebrities of color, or the visibility of Othered cultural practices or aesthetics, and a vehicle that allows for greater contact toward a new racial politics, the presumption of colorblindness obfuscates the persistent of symbolic and everyday violence that defines our current racial moment. Charles Barkley, in his recent conversation-based book, *Who's Afraid of a Large Black Man*, reflects this discursive field, not only finding ways to celebrate the colorblind and diverse realities of contemporary popular culture that demonstrate immense racial progress, but the transformative possibilities. "You had a generation, the one before mine, who are now in their forties, who are

in positions of power and influence in their companies in the music industries," writes Barkley. "Now you have a brother in a movie like XXX, you know what I'm saying. Just because rap has kind of churned the soil. The kid who might have been a total racist without rap is like, 'Yo, I like this, I like this. I like everything that has to do with rap culture. I like Spike. I like Jordan. I like Jay-Z. You know it's not so hard to accept.'" (131). Reflecting a colorblind discourse, Barkley links progress to ascendance of people of color into dominant institutions and the visibility of celebrities of color. In his estimation, the popularity of hip-hop or black cinematic productions is evidence of a new racial politics. Ice Cube follows suit during his interview with Charles Barkley, surmising this celebratory vision of popular culture, one that does not account for the complexity of race and racism within contemporary America:

I think three things transcend race: music, entertainment, and athletics.... Race truly goes out of consciousness too, in sport.... It's pretty much the same in the entertainment industry. In a certain instance you could care less who it is because you saw something and you loved it.... I think there are things that, on a day-to-day basis, transcend race and put us all on the same plane, you know? But to me, it's also natural for people to root for their own kind to succeed, no matter who it is [Barkley 132].

While immensely problematic on many counts, Ice Cube captures the widespread sentiment regarding race within contemporary America and hegemonic understandings of race as an individual act or taste. Likewise, it obscures the continuations of white supremacist discourses and practices in post-civil rights America, all of which are further displaced from the national consciousness through celebrations of visibility and the ubiquity of moral panics fixated with sex and violence.

The ascension of the civil rights movements during the 1950s and 1960s resulted in an end to the formal enactment of the color line. Through protest, struggles inside the courts and in the streets, and "ceaseless agitation" the civil rights movement was successful in forcing the state to formally outlaw Jim Crow segregation. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the numerous Supreme Court cases that preceded and followed these landmark cases, all of which came as the result of widespread protest did not, however, eliminate racism or racial inequality. "The problem of the twenty-first century seems to be the absence of a color line," notes Patricia Hill Collins. "Formal legal discrimination has been outlawed yet contemporary social practices produce virtually identical racial hierarchies as those observed by Du Bois" (32). Whether talking about rates of educational attainment, rates of incarceration, wealth and income disparities, infant mortality rates, AIDS or stroke cell infection rates, residential segregation or any other meas-

ure of political, residential, economic, social or cultural inequality, people of color remain clustered at the bottom of America's political, economic, and social hierarchies.

The persistence of inequality is not merely the result of vestiges of the formalized color line and slavery, or the persistence of ideas of race, dominant ideologies, and social practices, all of which define racism (and facilitate similar racialized outcomes, but also new forms of racism (ideologies, practices and discourse) that contribute to contemporary racial organization. As Collins describes this exact historical moment, new racism "reflects a situation of permanence and change" (33). In other words, as the outcomes and realities of inequality mirror those of 1896, 1919, 1968, the realities of racial formation, institutional organization, and contemporary racial politics embody a new form of racism. The persistence of "new racism" is dependent on the dissemination of supportive imagery, and post-civil rights, colorblind offerings within virtual reality of other sources of entertainment are now more important than ever, as the fervent need to consume, and thus believe, that "we have overcome" is probably stronger at this post-civil rights moment than it has been since the late 1960s. The symbolic violence that is offered within games like *GTA:SA* or *True Crime: NY* is emblematic of such representation. Violence that justifies, naturalizes and rationalizes persistent inequality, while simultaneously shifting public discourse away from racism and toward morals and values—the condemnation of hip-hop or thugs (i.e. blackness) is thus not a racial phenomenon but one about behavior; it is the sin and not the sinner.

Yet, as evident in the ongoing debate regarding GTA, the various lines of debate emanate from a similar place that does not question the ways in which these games perpetuate violence through distorting, dehumanizing, and reifying dominant understandings of race and racism. Each accepts the virtual inscriptions of the ghetto, or these game's vision of hip-hop or blackness, one celebrating their ghetto-centric imagination as evidence for their own racial enlightenment ("we like black people—even the thugs and gangsters—so we can't be racist"), the other condemning a community and its values because of its violence, criminality, acceptance of drugs, or hyper sexuality. This "racism without racists"—positing deficiencies and differences as cultural and race as incidental—is a defining quality of new racism, constituted through the discourse surrounding GTA in particular, and ghetto-centric video games in general.

One of the more salient elements of new racism, especially as it relates to popular culture and political discourse, is the constancy of signs of dysfunction among communities of color that require societal

control and regulation. While neither the demonization of black bodies, nor calls for societal regulation are new, the scale of the discourse of representation of dysfunctionality, the extent of commodification, and the establishment of clear class-based boundaries has rendered these old-style ideologies in its new form. Rhonda Williams describes this moment of old and new racism as living at the crossroads, where the celebration of racial progress and the visibility of black public figures does not match the persistence of violence, inequality, and representations of dysfunctionality. "Today's African American college students have come of age in a political culture that regularly recycles two signs of black dysfunction: anti-social black (male) criminality and (female) sexuality are the behavioral manifestations of contemporary black cultural chaos. From "scholarly and journalist treatises," to popular music and cinema, representations and debates regarding the black "underclass anchor contemporary race talk, and speak the language that distinguishes the aberrant underclass from the striving middle class" (Williams 141). Throughout the discussion of varied reactions to GTA, and some textual analysis, this chapter ultimately concludes that both the game itself and the various receptions replicate such practices reducing blackness to a sign of criminality, hypersexuality, and cultural/moral chaos, to which some call for regulation/state intervention while others celebrate in "their world," enjoying the opportunity to play in a world defined by criminality, dysfunctionality, and cultural chaos.

Conclusion

In both the demonization and celebration of the virtual reality offered through the GTA series, the horror and praise resulting from suburban bodies entering the otherwise impenetrable (segregated) world of gangstas, thugs, hip-hop, and ghettos, and the surrounding discourse of reception, dominant understandings of race, hegemonic rationalization (explanations) of contemporary social inequality, and the advisable methods (policies) needed to address current issues become visible. In other words, the GTA series and the myriad of reactions each concretize common sense understandings of blackness and the ghetto as a spectacle in need of state control and surveillance, each centering and naturalizing narratives and representations of violence and sexual deviancy, at once finding pleasure here with others paralyzed by fear. "Constructions of deviant sexuality emerge as a primary location for the production of these race and class subjectivities," writes Micki McElhara in *Our Monica Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Inter-*

est. "Policy debates and public perceptions on welfare and impoverished Americans have focused relentlessly on the black urban poor—blaming nonnormative family structures, sexual promiscuity, and aid-induced laziness as the root cause of poverty and mobilizing of welfare queens, teen mothers, and sexually predatory young men to sustain the dismantling of the welfare state" (159). The representations and images available within *GTA: LCS*, *GTA: VC*, and most transparently within *GTA: SA*, the dialogue and narrative deployed within these games, and the subsequent public discourse and eventual racialized culture war defined by both panic around and fetishization of ghetto violence and hyper sexuality function as "naturalizing narratives of deviant sexuality and aberrant family structures" toward the legitimacy of persistent inequality, ongoing white privilege, the destruction of social welfare programs, and the erection of stronger walls of segregation and more powerful arms of state violence.

The discourse concerning *GTA3*, and especially in the wake of the release of *GTA: SA*, in both celebrations and within those efforts to denounce these games for the good of America's children ultimately reify dominant understandings of blackness and a hegemonic ghetto-centric imagination. Whereas its fans cite pleasure and authenticity in the game's display of violence, deviant sexuality and other signifiers of a gangsta's way of life, its critics cite these same aesthetics, behaviors, and morals as the cause for alarm and the basis of their calls for state intervention. Moreover, the positioning of this discourse as one regarding the moral or cultural harm of ghetto-centric games (and not war games) elides crucial questions regarding white supremacy, state violence, and new racism. As Lauren Berlant laments in her discussion of cultural citizenship and the conservative focus on sex and intimacy, their use of "divisive rhetoric" as the basis of their seizing power since the election of Ronald Reagan, and the ubiquity of sexualized culture wars ultimately obscures and erases public debates and questions regarding justice, equality, and state violence within contemporary America.

It is my view that critical engagement with what ought to constitute the social privileges and obligations of citizenship must be reorganized around these questions—of national capitalism, metropolitan and rural poverty, environmental disintegration, racist thinking, and ordinary concrete practices and other banalities of national evil [8–9].

The widespread debate between gamers (players, designers, industry supporters, academics) and the "haters" (politicians, media critics, conservative cultural groups, and the religious right) have successfully erased the racist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and xenophobic repre-

sentational and textual utterances of the entire series. From its reification of blackness as the ontological sign of decay and moral indecency to its demonization of Latino immigrants as economic parasites, the manner in which these games uncritically give life and voice to "concrete practice and other banalities of national evil," is elided from the discourse. Likewise, the dialectics between the virtual and the real, whether in discourse (culture of poverty, the racialization of communities of color) and practice (police brutality; the war on drugs) is further obscured by the discursive focus on sex, violence, and the efforts to protect the purity and innocence of (some) children.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of protecting children from harmful representations of black men, or the virtual erasure of women of color, none of these officials have publicly denounced or called for regulation of racist or racialized games. These same legislative bodies have not elucidated plans to insulate "our children" from white supremacist narratives promulgated by the video game industry. None have questioned the racial content of games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. There is no discourse concerning the dissemination of racial stereotypes or the affirmation of the racist status quo. Outrage remains in a discourse of children, its focus being violence and sexual content, rather than the effects/significance of these games in society, especially as spaces of racial meaning and state violence. The nature of *Grand Theft Auto* reflects this fact, as does the silence of politicians, cultural commentators and anti-racist proponents; make clear about war against youth.

While the motivations of profit and appealing to a marketplace driven by the allure of hip-hop and black cultural styles with white consumers drives the continued production of games like *GTA: SA* or *Gang Wars*, its gaming dimensions and its surrounding discourse of reception (celebration and condemnation) must be understood within a racial context. "The black other occupies a complex site, a place where fears, desires, and repressed dreams are lodged," argues Norman Denzin (7). More than fears and repressed dreams, the black body and those racialized spaces exist in virtual reality and the national imagination as "a site of spectacle, its blackness" existing as "a potential measure of evil, and menace," necessitating containment and control. The representation of blackness or inner-city communities through a hegemonic ghetto-centric imagination, the celebrations of adults becoming gangstas, and the fears caused by the appearance of hypersexual and violent ghetto games follows longstanding white supremacist logic that "focuses, organizes, and translates blackness into commodifiable representations and desires that [can] be packaged and marketed across the landscape of American popular culture" or otherwise confines it outside the dominant racial order

(Gray, "Watching" 165). In other words, black bodies will continue to be marketed and commodified by a global video game industry just as those same bodies will be subjected to the rules and logic that emanate from white supremacy.

Moreover, the similarity in frames and discursive logic that emanate from all circles (haters and players alike) reveals that its providing players the chance to don the costume (hair, muscles, tattoos, gear) of a true "gangsta" or visiting America's most violent spaces does not represent a transgression to traditional (white supremacist, hetero-normative, patriarchal) values that is either worthy of condemnation or celebration, illustrating how corporate commodification reifies dominant ideologies and racial/gender/sexual logics, all while the game industry cashes in on their ghetto-centric representations, politicians and other public figures cash in on the controversy and moral panics, and gamers continue to cash in on their whiteness.

As politicians focus on video game violence and the moral offerings within gaming culture, thereby eluding the racial and ideological dimensions of these games and ignoring broader societal problems, and its defenders obscure similar dimensions and their connections to virtual reality, it is important to remember that the GTA series, *GTA:SA* particularly, and a ghetto-centric virtual reality matters because racism kills— the celebrations and demonizations of blackness jointly facilitate the hegemony of new racism, which in the end maintains color lines and white privileges, whether manifesting in the perpetuation of the prison industrial complex or systemic poverty that reared its head in wake of Hurricane Katrina. It matters because social justice—the ability of all people to live their lives free of oppressions based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and ideology—is a goal that U.S. society has long forgone for profit at any cost. It has never been "just a game." It has always been lives, livelihoods, injustice, and a desire for much, much more.

Works Cited

- Barkley, Charles, and Michael Wilbon. *Who's Afraid of a Large Black Man?* New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Reason*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Denzin, Norman. *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002.
- Gray, Herman. *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005.
- _____. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.

- Hooks, Bell. *Oulaw Culture: Resisting Representation*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- James, Joy. *Shadoboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.
- Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Leonard, David. "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other." *Smile* 3.4 (Nov. 2003). 15 Dec. 2005. <http://www.utpjournals.com/jour.html?ip=simile/issue12/leonardfulltext.html>
- Loughey, Paul. "Family Entertainment Protection Act." *Game Daily Biz* 11 Nov. 2005. 15 Dec. 2005. <http://gamesindustry.biz/news.php?aid=13330>
- McCullagh, Declan. "Senators Target 'Graphic' Video Games." *ZDNet News* 29 Nov. 2005. 15 Dec. 2005. <http://news.com.com/Senators+target+graphic+video+games/2100-1043_3-5975913.html>
- McEllya, Micki. "Trashing the Presidency: Race, Class and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair." *Our Monica Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest*. Ed. Lauren Berlant and Lisa Dugan. New York: New York UP, 2001: 156-174.
- "Modding Community Gets Angry." 26 July 2005. 15 Dec. 2005. <http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/san-andreas/index.php>
- Morgan, Fred. "Video Games Offer Tutorials in Violence." 5 Dec. 2005. 15 Dec. 2005. <http://www.muskogeephenix.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051205/OPI-NON/51204012/1014>
- Murray, Soraya. "High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing Grand Theft Auto." *Performing Arts Journal* 80 (2005): 91-98.
- Slewin, Peter. "A Push to Restrict Sales of Video Games Illinois Governor Seeks to Prevent Minors From Purchasing 'Adult Material.'" *Washington Post* 16 Dec. 2005. A08.
- Sweeting, Paul. "Bill Targets Video Game Retailers." *Video Business* 1 Dec. 2005. 15 Dec. 2005. <http://www.videobusiness.com/article/CA6288381.html>
- Thompson, Clive. "The Bad Lieutenant." *Ward* 23 Nov. 2005. 15 Dec. 2005. <http://www.wired.com/news/culture/games/0,69636-0.html>
- Vargas, Jose Antonio. "Gamers Intersect." *Washington Post* 27 Sept. 2005. C01.
- Williams, Rhonda. "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender." *The House that Race Built*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Vintage, 1998: 136-156.