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# Rhetoric of Reputation: Protagoras' Statement, Snoop Doggy Dogg's Flow

SPENCER HAWKINS

REPUTATION CAN decide our station in life, and it is so often out of our control. This anxiety-inducing situation can leave us obsessed with the project of controlling our reputations. Contemporary hip hop and ancient Greek sophistry have enjoyed immense success by responding to this desperate obsession, among American teenagers and among politically ambitious, litigious ancient Greeks, respectively. Both systems propose means to control the kind of impression we make on others. These discourses of self-promotion train people to take their status into their own hands, to represent themselves whether in song and banter, or in court and assembly speeches. I compare these two kinds of rhetoric on several bases: their commercial success, cultural impact, shared individualistic ethos, and the moral outrage that their expressed attitudes provoked. The difference between aesthetic and rationalistic discourse masks the force of their analogous effects. I have a lot to prove to show that sophisticated rhetoric for winning court cases exerts a force similar to a form of pop music that originated as street party music. Classisists become classist when they refuse to read high and low forms together and to compromise their disciplinary scope to acknowledge powerful kinships between classical and contemporary genres. In comparing the hip hop of the early 1990s with the teachings of the first sophists in Classical Greece, I seek to advocate more generally the pursuit of structural similarities between high and low discourses.

## CONTROVERSY

CHARISMA DIVIDES the suspicious from the enthralled. The commercial success of rappers and sophists earned detractors (*hata's*) for both parties. The word “sophist” (*sophistês*) has drifted far from its ancient Greek meaning, which is not exactly “wise man” (*sophós*), nor “lover of wisdom” (*philósophos*), but perhaps “dealer in wisdom.” Wisdom sounds like a priceless item, and thus worth any price, yet Plato and others doubted the honesty of those who claimed to deal it out for money. At least since Nancy Reagan’s “Just say no!” anti-drug campaign, the drug dealer has become the American figure for malicious dealing, and the relief sought in drugs only differs from wisdom’s promise of happiness in that drugs have a more instant, immediate—though externally mediated—effect; drug effects and newly acquired wisdom are altered, “higher” states of mind. Gangsta rappers describe how successfully they sell drugs while rappers of various types sometimes figure street knowledge as a commodity that they also “drop,” or teach, in rap. The figure of the dealer-rapper operates clearly in Snoop Doggy Dogg’s first album *Doggystyle*, where the rapper describes his own life of ever enjoying drugs, formerly selling drugs, and currently producing “dope” rap. By selling “dope” rap, Snoop becomes a figurative drug dealer, like Gorgias, who compares persuasion to a drug in the context of his own persuasive speech, “Encomium of Helen.”<sup>1</sup>

To call someone a “sophist” today is almost the equivalent within intellectual parlance of accusing a person of a crime. The title “sophist” marks a thinker as untrustworthy, as a saltimbanco who hucksters fashionable ideas. Karl Marx points to a moment of circular logic in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* by announcing, “Here Hegel is a sophist.”<sup>2</sup> When Slavoj Žižek’s *Tarrying with the Negative* strives to redeem Hegel’s project, Žižek calls Hegel’s detractors “sophists.” The insult is so dismissive as to be apophantic: he need not even name a specifically sophistic fallacy. All it takes to prove superior to a sophist

is to reject the sophist's loose morals. Žižek, for instance rejects Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard for their "relativization of [the scope of truth] to historically specified intersubjective community."<sup>3</sup> But some Classicists would argue that the ancient sophists did not lack moral integrity—they were merely skeptical of moral preaching. Barbara Cassin, for instance, has defended ancient sophism's lasting value on the ground that its relativism can counter excessive moralism in philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Thinkers derive an implicit claim to sincerity by attacking relativists with the word "sophist." The image of the thinker with loose commitments arouses suspicion. The mercenary lawyer, who sells his smarts, is a cliché. Sophists then like lawyers today enabled the smooth functioning of the ancient Greek system of legal representation. What is more, they were in some ways the first intellectuals in Greece; their approach to epistemology, rhetoric, and metaphysics appears to have been both more systematic, more rationalistic, and thus more antinomian than that of the pre-Socratic philosophers. They had to sell rationalism to a culture of wild myth and ritual, and did so by advertizing the thrilling power of constructed truth.

Sophism was instituted, according to legend, when a military coup resulted in the exile of many landowners on Sicily in the city of Syracuse. Once the military regime was ousted, the exiled citizens returned to claim their property, but various people made competing claims to the same property. Litigants sought training in legal rhetoric in order to make their claims successful. The first of these legal counselors was the first sophist Corax, "crow" in Greek, an animal whose reputation in Aesopic fables was already that of the clever opportunist. He had seized the historical moment in which to teach others how to seize their moment in claims court. A generation later, sophists began travelling around the Greek-speaking world, claiming that truth exists only relative to the human perspective. "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are, that they are, of things that are not, that they are not" (80B1 DK). With a crow's opportunistic wisdom, Protagoras of Abdera spat on convention, denying the existence of any power,

divine, aristocratic, or natural, that could interfere with the spontaneous work of the human mind.<sup>5</sup> Not only did litigious Athenians pursue Protagoras as a teacher of rhetoric, Pericles even appointed him to advise over matters of governance in the colony at Thurri.<sup>6</sup> The sophist-fueled reexamination of traditional discourse allowed for the first democracies in Athens, where aristocratic traditions had reigned since the Mycenaean period (c. 1000 BC), and even their gods lived under fear of Zeus, the celestial tyrant.

*Doggystyle* was released at an opportune time, as attested by its record breaking fast popularity. It was the first debut album of any genre to reach the number one position on the Billboard 200 in its release week (a composite ranking of sales and radio play).<sup>7</sup> After the destruction of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, partly a response to police brutality against Rodney King, the general public was afraid and curious about angry, young black men, about what they had to say and what they were going to do next. Abrasiveness divides people. Some say that it provokes precisely in order to define its audience. As Snoop introduces his cover of a Slick Rick song, “This one goes out to Slick Rick. If y’all don’t like it, eat a dick. If you with me, sing that shit.” If you don’t get the joke or if you can’t “feel it,” then you are not one of us.<sup>7</sup> If you get it, then welcome to our club. This is how gangsta rap promotes a kind of illicit, youth solidarity against adults. Gangsta rap builds what Josh Kun calls an “audiotopia,” a musical fantasy space populated only by the likeminded.<sup>8</sup>

By figuring rap as a “game” akin to drug dealing, gangsta rap has created a new language for talking about violent competition that many can identify with. Notorious B.I.G., for example, warns that crack dealers should avoid cops, not for fear of getting caught, but for fear of what rivals will think: “If you ain’t getting’ bagged stay the fuck from police / If niggas think you snitchin’ they ain’t trying to listen / They be sittin’ in your kitchen, waiting to start hittin’” (“Ten Crack Commandments”). This is the usual scope of gangsta rap topics: dealing with rivals, rather than resisting the oppressive out-

group. Progressives criticize gangsta rap for eroding solidarity among black men and between black men and woman. Occasionally, a prominent rapper like Tupac will gesture towards Black Power: “We might fight with each other, but I promise you this / We’ll burn this bitch down, get us pissed” (“To Live and Die in L.A.”). Most of the successful gangsta rap songs, however, do not protest white abuses; rather, they glorify the power to exploit black women and to intimidate other black men.

#### PERSUASIVE RHETORIC

RAPPERS AND SOPHISTS disturb people with their cynical attitude towards moral conventions, but we can hardly accuse them of hypocrisy. They exert their spellbinding effect in the manner typical of the pyramid scheme: by advertizing advertisement, by persuading their audiences that persuasion works. We see this especially in two figures: the ancient sophists Protagoras and Gorgias and the contemporary gangsta rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg (Calvin Broadus’ first nom d’artiste—before his self-reinventions as Snoop Dogg and recently as Snoop Lion). One difference here: the sophist promotes others’ courtroom persuasion, namely their clients’. While Snoop does once rap: “I got the cultivating music that be captivating he / who listens, to the words that I speak,” his lyrics never explain how his “captivating” music is also “cultivating,” or how one applies Snoop’s model to himself. The gangsta rapper attempts to simultaneously describe and demonstrate his (sometimes her) persuasiveness and embodies the position of linguistic mastery. He reminds the listener that well timed, well selected words are profitable since they are instrumental in collecting money from prostitutes (as their pimp), from drug users (as their dealer), and from music audiences (as rapper). Both figures sell the fantasy that persuasive rhetoric wreaks such powerful effects that it benefits its user even when he (or sometimes she) openly admits to being a manipulator.

The two figures package persuasion in different products. The sophist lets you identify directly, the rapper only vicariously with the persuader. Sophists trained other people to win court cases whereas Snoop himself had just been charged with murder when his first album came out. But, like sophists, Snoop and his producers profited from the court system: record stores multiplied their pre-orders for his first album after his murder trial was announced. Other obvious differences disguise their similar rhetorical means. Snoop Dogg and Protagoras occupy different corners of the cultural universe. Snoop seems thoroughly contemporary. His eclectic post-modern self-styling crosses boundaries of geography, audience-age, and time period since he refers to Southern twang and West Coast gang affiliation, gangster lore, children's "D-iz-ouble D-iz-utch" sound games, Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*, and 70s funk and soul. Despite his eclecticism, his music, as first featured on an album by the group Niggaz with Attitude, helped establish the extreme irreverence of gangsta rap. Like pornography, his vulgar content offends yet circulates well in free markets (many songs mention his "nutz" and "dick"). I charitably read his bravura as an act of defiance against institutionalized racism. After all, his producer Dr. Dre made his first big hit with "Niggaz4Life," a song about how African Americans might as well call themselves "niggaz" because that is how they are treated no matter what they call themselves. Yet Snoop's is not a collective response to racism. The response is: I am saving myself, save yourself if you can ("you gotta get yours, before I get mine," he taunts in "Gin and Juice"). Snoop leaves less empowered options to his songs' addressee: get out of his way, let him fuck you, or just bounce to his music.

The second-person does not necessarily address the audience in a pop song. Bouncing to the music is the response that Snoop implies for his listener—his threats apostrophize absent rivals and other "bitches." Snoop's relaxed voice has been asking you to bounce by serenading you in restaurants, malls, and supermarkets, wherever pop music is mass mar-

keted. But cool and aggression have always gone together. Black Americans invented cool for a strategic reason: the law exerts violence against black Americans more often than it protects them from violence, and so it has become a matter of survival to mask aggressive feelings for fear of lynching or other brutality. Snoop raps in the persona of a *cool*, yet violent man; he delivers theatrically exaggerated threats in a patter that conveys self-mastery. Two years after his album came out, the National Political Congress of Black Women, the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus all spoke out in opposition to the mass marketing of gangsta rap on the radio and in record stores.<sup>9</sup> But its scandal (combined with the innovative “G Funk” sound produced by Dr. Dre on the album) made Snoop’s first album the highest selling record of 1993, and the first hip-hop album to achieve that position.<sup>10</sup>

Wealthy, itinerant sophists gleaned opprobrium for corrupting Athenian youth, but were never brought to trial. Instead, the Athenian courts made an example of a less wealthy Athenian iconoclast: Socrates. Aristophanes portrays Socrates as an unqualified sophist, whose quack legal advice causes a desperate client’s ruin, in the comedy *Clouds*. Yet for his part, Socrates consistently lambastes sophists, since he believed they prefer seeming to being, and successful arguments to truth. (Plato, *Euthydemus* 283e, 285d; *Gorgias* 465c; *Republic* 1.340).<sup>11</sup> The sophist school of thought has remained underground for most of the history of philosophy, and is still no threat to today’s youth. Protagoras of Abdera who makes the case that wisdom can be taught in Plato’s eponymous dialogue, makes a free-thinking antagonist to dogmatic Platonism. As Barbara Cassin emphasizes in “Who’s Afraid of the Sophists,” the sophists’ disrepute comes from their preference to hone language’s *effects* rather than evaluate language’s *intentions*, a preference which may have its day in contemporary philosophy. As Stanley Cavell points out, the sophists’ focus on effects coincides nicely with practical philosophy, such as pragmatic speech act theory.<sup>12</sup> This

is the theory that words do not just say things, but often do things: like change our marital status, command our actions, or orient our hopes and fears of the future.

Snoop manipulates the effects of language without the pretense of teaching wisdom. Snoop asserts his supremacy in all domains from wealth to rap skills to penis size, whereas Protagoras distributes human-power widely: “man (*ánthrôpos*) is the measure of all things,” that is, human beings in general, with Protagoras as anthropological herald of our privilege, but not as its sole enjoyer. Both men made money in competitive, verbal display. As a sophist, Protagoras gave speeches and wrote books, just as a popular rapper both performs and records. The titles of their main recorded works both evoke the figure of standing erect at someone else’s horizontal body, a figure that conveys their pleasure in conquest: Protagoras’ book, *Takedowns* (*Katabállontes*) and Snoop’s first album, *Doggystyle*.

Their different personae and pathos mask a common vehicle. Sophism and gangsta rap use similar structures, such as parallel constructions, which describe what you and I want (“you gotta get yours, before I gotta get mine,” chants Snoop) or how different parties respond to the same event (the Trojan War was good for the Achaeans, but bad for the Trojans, writes the anonymous sophist author of *Dissoi Logoi*). Parallel structure helps convey a relativistic metaphysics that treats reality as a matter of commensurable yet splintered perspectives. But Protagoras commands authority, which only becomes funny when Plato gives a clownish depiction of Protagoras’ followers’ obsequiousness. They follow him while he discourses and paces inside of a wealthy Athenian’s courtyard, and they now to move and leave a path in the middle of their group when the master needs to turn around and pace in the other direction. Snoop’s party songs and over the top gangsterism has a comic effect for his fans—it is those outraged by his violent, misogynistic lyrics who find him deadly serious. Snoop is vulgar whereas Protagoras, in Plato’s depiction, seems extremely polite, as befits an elite intellectual.

Snoop's persona does not command the sophist's intellectual authority, and therefore he positions himself through comedy as the one who offends and marks the out-group, thus building the bonds of his audience, the in-group. Both gangsta rap and ancient Greek comedy exert this effect.<sup>13</sup>

Like the sophist Gorgias' speech advertizing persuasion under the pretense of defending Helen's infidelity, Snoop displays his rhetorical mastery in a persuasive speech defending the pimp's practices. Snoop's homily apostrophizes a female prostitute, but it is videotaped at a small, private gathering of young men. The video was taken down from youtube, but here is an excerpted quotation:

When you're out there doing what you're doing, you're giving pleasure to so many different men, and you're giving me pleasure and I know that satisfies you, don't it? Don't it move you? Doesn't it move you to satisfy me?... All I'm saying is that—you know, baby, let's be nutritious about this. . . . it revolves around me *not only*.  
(*Dr. Dre and Snoop*)

These casual thoughts come in sophisticated form; his rhetorical arsenal includes meiosis, pysma, anaphora, anacoluthon, and anastrophe. I will parse these classical rhetorical terms and his use of them above, in order to show how ancient rhetoric still serves contemporary self-promotion. He employs *meiosis*, that is, stripped-down description, when he calls the pimp "the player," and calls prostitution "doing what you're doing" which sounds supportive, except that he elsewhere gloats at prostitution's stigma when he raps, "we don't love them ho's." *Pysma*, or a string of questions, overwhelms the listener, "when you're out there doing what you're doing, you're giving pleasure to so many different men, and you're giving me pleasure and I know that satisfies you, don't it? Don't it move you? Doesn't it move you to satisfy me?" Those questions also pummel the ear with *anaphora*, or several sentences starting with the nearly same first word, "Don't" and "doesn't." *Anacoluthon*, a mid-sentence switch from one syntax to another, displays the

speaker's casual comfort with his audience, "All I'm saying is that—you know, baby, let's be nutritious about this." The next line intensifies the casual tone of the monologue with an *anastrophe*, departure from normal word order for emphasis, as in "it revolves around me *not only*," Snoop's word order emphasizes how it's not just about him as opposed to ending the sentence with "revolves around me," which would emphasize that pimping *is* mostly a selfish enterprise.

Snoop's rhetorical sophistication makes him a target among other gangsta rappers for being too cultivated, inauthentic, a mere "actor." Snoop's defense of pimping makes recourse to a wide set of rhetorical tropes and figures, and he exhibits his skill for the amusement of a group of men. (Recall that Gorgias ends his defense of Helen by telling the reader that he wrote his speech to serve as an "amusement" (*paígnion*).) Yet homosocial conviviality turns into homophobic sexual taunts whenever Snoop apostrophizes rival rappers. The imagery underlying the aggressive taunts is both homophobic and homoerotic, such as when he tells rival rapper Easy E that his dick is in his mouth in the song "Fuck with Dre Day." Easy E would later make similar taunts to Snoop and Dre: "You and your Doggy Dogg think that you're startin' shit. Both of you bitches can come and suck my doggy dick." Easy E's diss song is titled "Real Muthafuckin G's," and calls out his rivals for the rhetorical refinement and musical artistry—which he frames as incompatible with the criminal lifestyle: "Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg are fuckin' actors, prankstas, studio gangstas, bustas, but this time you're dealin' with some real motherfuckas." Easy presents mere rhetoric as a failing of gangsta rap: what they *say* should matter less than what they *do* (kill, steal, intimidate, get laid, get money). But the relationship is not straightforward: Snoop would not rap about his own persona, if telling did not accomplish a desired effect. Gangsta rappers often present rap as a means to an end; their skill is not in rapping, but in earning money. (As Notorious B.I.G raps, "rap was secondary, money was necessary,"

“Respect.”) Plato accuses the sophist Thrasymachus of just such an ends-justify-the-means attitude, which subordinates skill in one’s profession as secondary to skill in making money. This is how rhetorical mastery becomes suspect and conjures the profile of a mercenary.

But sophism is the teaching of rhetoric, not simply its display. Do rappers teach rhetoric? Protagoras and Snoop both sold the idea of selling, and the implicit idea in the rap song is that the song models the sale. Their songs celebrate gangsta persuasiveness, not just gangsta toughness. The Sophistic Enlightenment and the commercial success of gangsta rap each exemplified epoch-making discursive entrepreneurship and created new markets. Even though rap is a musical genre and sophism a school of thought centered around providing legal council, rap, like sophism, makes its appeal heard semantically, and thus in a form to be emulated in language. Despite their different appeals to audience and different cultural functions, both promote radical, Faustian individualism and prescribe the cultivation of rhetorical skills as the route to individual success.

#### DOPE AS A TROPE

SOPHISTS AND GANGSTA RAPPERS both employ drug references, which allegorize persuasion as a drug, in order to name the force that alters perspectives and empowers the human to induce changes in perspective. The sophist Gorgias compares the varied effects of persuasive speech to the effects of a *phármakon*, the Greek word for drug, which could mean “medicine,” “intoxicant,” and “poison:”

The power of speech bears the same relation to the ordering of the mind as the ordering of drugs bears to the constitution of bodies. Just as different drugs expel different [ailments] from the body, and some stop it from living, so too some speeches cause sorrow, some cause pleasure, some cause fear, some give the hearers confidence, some drug and bewitch the mind with an evil persuasion.<sup>14</sup>

Ancient Greek medicine already recognized that drugs could help or harm people depending on the drug, the person, and the symptom to be treated. Persuasion had a similar range of effects. Gorgias saw the persuasiveness of sophists' teaching as highly consequential. After all, it could sway court juries. The middle voice of the verb *peithô*, meaning "persuade," comes to mean "obey" Attic Greek. Whatever the sophist's ambitions, the sophist's power over his audience is like that of a pharmacist or drug-dealer over patients and clients.

Successful persuasion depends on first persuading a person that your "dope" is authentic, that you know what you're talking about. Snoop's image as an actual pimp and drug dealer helps to bolster the idea that he alters minds. In the dramatic skits between songs on his first album, the characters surrounding Snoop include a woman washing the back of a very bored-sounding Snoop, two men who shoot at him without explanation after saying, "let's get [him]," and a confrontational, jealous man whom he shoots after explaining that they could "be gentlemen" or "get gangsta." The staged interactions on *Doggystyle* center around people whose fawning and threats do not faze the disaffected Snoop. These dynamics present Snoop as clear on his purpose, namely to enjoy the fruits of his laid-back life as a rapper, who has gently excused himself from drug-dealing and pimping, without cutting his ties to his friends-become-audience. On *Doggystyle*, the skit titled "Pump Pump" portrays a female fan who likes Snoop because "he is so fine [and] his music is so fuckin dope." In the song, "Lodi Dodi," a rejected ex-lover complains, "I love you so. How much you'll never know. 'Cuz you took your dope away from me." The song is actually a cover of a Slick Rick song, in which Slick ventroloquizes a woman who is not drug-deprived but just expressing heart break, the way a soul singer would: "You took your love away from me." In Snoop's version, the man's source of his power is neither love nor language. The lyrics literalize the metaphor of persuasion as a drug, as Snoop's "dope." Dope emanates

from Snoop as persuasion from the mouth of an orator. “Your dope” becomes as desirable a quality as “your eyes,” “your smile,” or “your sweetness” are in the context of romantic cliché. With “dope” that signifies persuasiveness, Snoop’s dope becomes a legitimate commodity on the open market.

Applying “dope” as an adjective expresses an intense feeling of being impressed within the hip-hop sociolect, and is thus tied to all seeming positive effects, not just euphoric drug effects. It can be applied to things such as a “dope ride” for a nice-looking car or to situations, such as a “dope job” that seems not excessively stressful and amply remunerative. To call someone “dope,” you would have to be registering their ability to impress, some attractive or charismatic quality, rather than their future potential for success or other discreet good qualities. Dope is something that appeals by the impression it makes, irrespective of longterm consequences. Just as various factors affect susceptibility to drug addiction, a “dope” rapper might only impress suckers who trust their impressions impulsively. Aristotle claims that fallacious rhetoric only works on “the inexperienced,” “for the inexperienced are like those you view things from a distance.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it may primarily be inexperienced adolescents who are impressed by the lure of gangsta rap. Snoop does not acknowledge this limitation, of course.

#### THE POWER TO MOVE ONESELF

TIMELY STORIES, promises, and ideas make for hot commodities. Port towns attract cultural novelties since resources and needs already coalesce there. Even in pre-capitalistic port towns, like ancient Athens, sophists bearing radical skeptical ideas about gods, nature, and humanity had something to trade. Protagoras was supposedly born into servitude in Abdera, but his clever technique for tightly bundling wood impressed his master Democritus. Democritus liberated and educated him, and eventually Protagoras become an itinerant teacher. The most famous

sophists came to Athens to give lectures from distant lands such as Sicily, Thrace, and Asia Minor, and these sophists' foreignness in Athens added to popular mistrust. In the last book of the *Republic*, Plato accuses Protagoras of being a charlatan on the basis of his itineracy: if his lessons were effective then his countrymen would not let him travel but would want to keep him around for themselves.

The successful gangsta rapper too is itinerant, but his origins matter more since he claims to represent a demographic for whom poverty restricts geographic mobility. Long Beach was the main port for the greater Los Angeles area in the early twentieth century, when it was the movie production capitol before the industry moved 30 miles north to Hollywood. In the early 1990s, Long Beach produced Snoop Doggy Dogg, a recent graduate from the high-achieving Long Beach Polytechnic High School. Sophists were itinerant, like musicians on tour, but sophists did not harken back to their home territory, like rappers do. Successful gangsta rappers go on performance tours, but they must establish credible local affiliations. Snoop thus marketed his music as an autochthonous product of Long Beach.

Persuasion has some universal features, but its particulars reflect the possibilities and needs of specific social groups. The movements served different populations with different histories. Sophistry purported to empower citizens to pursue their interests within democratic assemblies. These ideals of equal opportunity influence were endorsed publicly when the influential statesman Pericles asserted that a stable polis meant equally distributed opportunity for influence. In his words, "power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people."<sup>16</sup> Pericles, the Athenian general who staved off Persian invaders by rallying various city-states to form the Delian League, also promoted direct democracy in Athens. Ideals of equality are notoriously vulnerable in practice. As Plato warns in the *Republic*, by giving every citizen a voice, the direct democratic assembly gives opportunity to forceful and charismatic leaders. Athenians felt ambivalent about

democracy, but were also wary of assembly speeches that disdained democracy and praised great individuals. In Demosthenes' 21st oration, he rides the line carefully between presenting his enemy as an elitist, and himself as elite only in his speaking ability, but not in his political sentiments. A Greek citizen learned rhetoric for reasons that overlap with a promise presently associated in urban communities with learning to rap, namely, the power to protect and even to enhance forms of power, such as wealth and status. But in both cases, there is a ceiling to the pursuit of power—which the rhetoric of sophists and gangsta rappers acknowledges.

Rapping can take the form of a competition for status, but its traditional participants are poor urban African-American youth, who experience many barriers to raising their station. For urban black rappers, the plausible rhetorical objective is not wealth, but status within one's local community where displaying one's intelligence can help establish alliances. Rap is both a competitive game and a form of protection. As Omar bin Hassan of rap group "The Last Poets" puts it:

Rap almost became an armor. . . . If someone buzzes at your door, and they want to kill you and they find you sleeping with their girlfriend, if you were good enough at rapping, if you were you were proficient enough and dramatic enough and convincing enough, you could talk yourself out of a gunshot wound.<sup>17</sup>

This is how rap promises to make man "the measure of all things," to reframe bad situations and to elicit good ones. The technique modeled in commercial rap recordings often involves the conjuring of fantastical situations with hypnotic language. Logic and deliberation are eschewed, and these eschewals offer a model for persuasion, a promise that inventive speech alone deflects social problems at least—although, as we will see, Snoop dabbles briefly in legal persuasion. Snoop in the early nineties is a rare case of a rapper who earned money, power, and legal freedom. But did he earn it through his art? In Plato's *Republic*, it is the sophist Thrasymachus who wants to blur the boundary (that Socrates

only later demarkates) between being good at what you do and being good at making money. Snoop is clearly good at the latter, and claims to be good at the former. If rap straddles means and ends (art as money-making, money-making as art), then Snoop's art is a perfect case for Thrasymachus' claim.

Snoop expresses a preference for establishment capitalism (entertainment) over criminal capitalism (pimping and drug dealing) in the skit that opens Snoop's first album, *Doggystyle*. Drug sales did not fund Snoop's success; his album came out on a major record label because billionaire entrepreneur Jimmy Iovine was willing to endorse artists whom Dr. Dre had recruited. But the two types of striving interpenetrate throughout the album. A nondescript friend interrupts Snoop enjoying a quiet night at home with an unspecified woman. Snoop tells the anonymous, interrupting friend: "I'm about to get up out this game," after which Snoop expresses his exasperation with the risks and annoyances of drug dealing. The friend retorts in shock with a defense of drug dealing: "you can smoke a pound a day, you got a big screen TV, *this is the American dream*, isn't it?" Snoop's ambiguous relationship to law reverberates in the other significant contradictions in his public face. One is his mainstream ubiquity in hit songs, reality TV, and advertisements despite his cultivated play with black stereotypes and self-styling as a gangbanger. A subtler contradiction forms in his music between his threats of violence and his imperturbable tone of voice, when he says, for instance "you'se the flea and I'm the big Dogg, I'll scratch you off my balls with my motherfucking paws" in the song, "Doggy Dogg World." That song title itself puns on a capitalist mantra that all relationships are unreliable, therefore one must need act reliably. Here too Snoop's style matches Plato's presentation of the sophist Thrasymachus. Plato has Thrasymachus claim that power entails no responsibilities but to one's own interests, which Socrates will show requires that a person first learn what the true interests of a person are, a task quite other and more demanding (says Socrates) than sophistic self-positioning.

Snoop flees from illegitimate capitalism to legitimate capitalism in various steps across the album. On Track 5, “The Shiznit,” Snoop describes his departure from crime without affect: “To tell you the truth, I swoop in a coop, I used to sell loot, I used to shoot hoops, but now I make hits every single day.” In his song, “Murder was the case [that they gave me],” he presents himself as confronted with would-be murderers and then confronted with a white-skinned angel who offers him a second chance at life in exchange for reform from his life of crime. Then, he enters the legitimate economy of selling crass music. The album *Doggystyle* avoids any deliberative or ethical discussion of Snoop’s drug-dealing or his vulgarity, and thereby it implicitly legitimates them—through the backdoor, as it were. The elision of agency is one of the hallmarks of Snoop’s rhetoric. While Gorgias (reasonably) elides Helen’s agency in her own abduction, it would be unlike an ancient sophist to downplay his own agency like Snoop does.

#### THE DIFFERENCE LATE CAPITALISM MAKES

WHETHER OR NOT the rhetor takes responsibility for the consequences of his rhetoric, the act of exhibiting rhetorical skill makes promises of its own. Discourses of individualistic self-promotion rise to prominence at times when the state demands that individuals state their own cases (legal, personal, or political). Snoop shows how to combine machismo and victimhood, laxity and self-promotion, all through the verbal medium. The historical moment of Snoop’s entrée is the beginning of the Clinton administration. Racial inequalities show for new reasons; a Democrat is in office, but the Welfare to Work Program fails perhaps because disparities between the highest and the lowest per capita income levels widen dramatically and raise the general cost of living during the huge expansion in the technology and finance industries.

In Plato’s *Gorgias* dialogue, Gorgias explains that rhetoric endows speakers with the power to control others. Gorgias namely teaches: “that good . . . which is truly the greatest,

being that which gives to men freedom in their own persons, and to individuals the power of ruling over others. . . .”<sup>18</sup> In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the danger of this form of control becomes explicit; sophists and sophist-trained orators use faulty logic: enthymemes instead of syllogisms. The basis for the conclusion is the logical relationship between the premises, whereas an enthymeme leaves something unsaid, because the audience would be more easily persuaded if some statements were not exposed openly. This leaves out the unseemly fact that we are involved in potentially manipulative persuasion games with one another.

Protagoras, as a teacher of rhetoric, was explicit—according to Plato—in his belief that sophists’ lessons could improve a person’s character. In Plato’s *Protagoras* dialogue, Protagoras explains that his role is to make his students more virtuous by understanding how to argue at length, since the practice of argument will eventually expose many errors in their thought, and self-aware reasoning will supersede corruption. While Snoop also claims to “cultivate,” he is primarily an entertainer and thus has a less explicit, more enthymemic doctrine. Snoop’s lyrics elide their premise as in the song “Gin and Juice,” when he draws, “you gotta get yours before I get mine.” The audience may hear: “Resources are scarce, so we have to ration pleasure to practice for other kinds of competition” or simply “Selfishness is the rule in late capitalism.” Since the song portrays a teenagers’ house party in a poor neighborhood, could he be expressing how scarce a resource compassion is in a market-driven world that demands radical self-promotion?

Snoop’s self-promotion campaign has expanded since the success of his first album. This paper has not taken up Snoop’s later career, which has included over nine studio albums, twenty-two film roles, including pornographic ones, and a reality TV show. As sophistry emerged in a historical moment after the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian Wars, so the moment between the two Iraq wars, the early 1990s, frames the era of *Doggystyle*. Snoop’s advocacy of self-promotion

deviates from the rawer, socially conscious indignation that the earlier generation of hardcore rappers such as Public Enemy and KRS-One embodied, and recent ones like Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, and Kendrick Lamar. In 1993, it wasn't Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" that was the most highly marketed face of hip-hop, but rather Snoop's callous antagonism. In 1993, *Doggystyle* sold more copies in the week of its release than any previous hip-hop album,<sup>19</sup> a year after Clinton's election as president, when the economy started expanding without obvious improvement in the lives of poorer classes. Hip-hop scholar Eithne Quinn sees the simultaneity between poor Americans becoming poorer in early 90s and what she calls the "Doggy-Dogging" of gansta rap; for the '90s economy "marked the demise of the conventional pre-Reagan era wisdom that an expanding economy was the salvation of low-paid workers."<sup>20</sup> Snoop himself would employ the pun in the song title, "It's a Doggy Dogg World," which captures the degree to which he saw self-promotion as the solution to the harsh side of the 1990s New Economy.

Neither a democratic president after Reagan's and Bush's free trade and deregulation policies nor economic expansion after a slump yielded either the anticipated social welfare policies or the trickle-down effect that some had mistakenly associated with economic growth. The 1992 Los Angeles riots gave expression to this disappointment, and also gave Snoop's self-promotion lyrics the public ear. He held an opaque mirror up to white power: where individualistic exploitation ran rampant but in institutionally unsanctioned ways, crime, black music, and dark humor. The appeal could not fail for the disgruntled (and to rebellion loving youth of all socio-economic statuses). And the media buzz could not have rang louder in the early 1990s about the harmful influence of gangsta rap on kids. Yet his gangsta persona also settles white fears since he never develops Black Power politics besides occasionally shouting the anti-police brutality slogan coined by his producers: "187 on a motherfucking cop." His comforting approach also helps him maintain the image of a

powerful rhetorical master. He seems to get whatever he wants but only because he never even wants the most difficult things: to oppose racial hierarchies or otherwise to face white systems of oppression (racial police proliferating, jail-sentencing inequalities, and deprivation from public resources through today's tacit forms of geographic segregation).

Economics and art may move along different timelines, as Jacob Burckhardt would have it, but it is worth complicating the historical analogy sketched above with the observation that while late twentieth-century United States and fifth-century Athens were both periods of major economic growth, the poor fared much differently in these two cases. The increasing wealth inequality in the early 1990s met with federal policies, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, that reduced public assistance, whereas the leaders during the Athenian Golden Age provided the least wealthy Athenians with new forms of public assistance, access to paid public offices, and even free land. As in all periods of growth, however, money was flowing into these communities, and it was not flowing evenly. The need to swim in the right current was evident in Athens and in Long Beach. Relativistic discourses like gangsta rap and sophistry inspire a faint hope in individual potential. Their premise is: the powerful will not help us; we (whoever we may include) will be the ones to save ourselves. We can give up our faith in failing aristocratic rulers who claim to embody the "good," whether they are the Cimons and Miltiadeses, military oligarchs of the Greek, pre-democratic city-states, or the quasi-dynastic Bush and Clinton families of today's United States. Hip-hop and sophistry register our disappointment with the old powers, and, even if these innovative rhetorical styles invite selfishness, we hear promises of change whenever a tool as inexpensive as language becomes the measure that makes the man.

## NOTES

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