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**The Iowa Review**

Volume 26  
Issue 3 *Fall*

Article 6

1996

# Welcome to the Ghetto, Black Spectacle from the Most Avant-Garde

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## Recommended Citation

Cruz, Ricardo Cortez. "Welcome to the Ghetto, Black Spectacle from the Most Avant-Garde." *The Iowa Review* 26.3 (1996): 51-61. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4467>

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## *Ricardo Cortez Cruz*

### WELCOME TO THE GHETTO, BLACK SPECTACLE FROM THE MOST AVANT-GARDE

ON MONDAY MORNING, a talking head is the first to report it: Something is rotten in the ghetto, it announces as an actuality, its voice on a nigga's hot portable black-and-white TV flippant and scratchy from the burden of trying to carry too much base/bass. We are running around in the street and through the grapevines when we hear the news. Another male has expired. From around-the-way. So, after first slinging some gin and juice, we go to check it out. After all, ever since we can remember, we have been addicted to death. Before attaching himself to me, one of my homeys sniffs a paintbox at the scene of the crime. Then the four of us raise our good baggies in unison in order to protect ourselves as we move the crowd, duck underneath the old marquee, and proceed to sneak inside the theater. I am the most discreet/discrete of the group. "What's wrong with this picture?" one of my partners snickers. We enter unformatted, our faces appearing extremely long while we creep-creep around the drawn curtain. While the TV cameras shoot shock video with the idea of sweetening the violence on air, one of my partners grabs my collar and hangs on. Murder is such a bloody deed. "Jesus!" he says, a golden leaf getting processed/fossilized in his wave by a Harry animator and his Blue Magic and Afro Sheen rubbing off onto my skin as his fingers go "bye-bye." I am unable to take anymore. So we turn around, careful not to bump an action cam or the overweight teamster by its side, and strut back out pushing the heavy door, kicking it, twisting the knob, shaking our big heads, talking jive and things that be, all of us smoking and acting real cool, imagining ourselves as the experimental players from Harlem, live on camera.

However, blood is still rubbing up against me, so I start to get edgy. We are the real players, but sometimes internal conflicts take over. For example, the nigga who is messed up and clinging on to me calls

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Contains a sample of "Put Your Foot Down" by Lillo Thomas.

himself Herod The Great. (He keeps pulling himself up by the bootstraps and changing his wave.) Herod, who was born an outside kid, makes me out to be Jesus, the annointed one. But, lately, I've been feeling moody like Hamlet. That's why I call my best friend "Horatio." He's a bourgeoisie flat-top from Exeter Prep School who simply admires me for the way I mix: I do the lamp, bus stop, or the Madison to hustle in the street. I stay in trouble cause I can jam.

"You could be the best goddamn mixer in the city," Horatio keeps repeating in my ear; the repetition of these words is a distorted drumvoice. "You're one of the good guys. Why can't you get your mind out of the ghetto?"

"The black man is under assault," Sportin' News asserts, unaware that Horatio is speaking, his own hair napping up.

We name the biggest mouth in our group Sportin' News. He's kind of like the fourth wall in naturalistic theatre; remove him from the group and you can know what we're doing without us showing any cognizance. Sportin' News is our Achilles' heel, but in our community everybody makes the world by whispers and comes to you in sections and Troy is simply another two-faced haint/spook/punk with a street sweeper or speaker or hot gun. "Don't you niggas roll without me!" Herod orders, again pulling himself up by the bootstraps after upsetting his Bugle Boys. Herod has been feeling sick for awhile now but won't admit it. Though Herod is paranoid, he likes hangin' with the homeboys.

#### PREMATURE AUTOPSIES

In the hood, my brothers survive on the hype that Manhattan is shaped like a giant Dutch massa's cigar. On summer nights, when black people are out in the alleys of Harlem—just vibin', trying to stay cool, clutching their Saturday night specials, Manhattan burns very brightly. Full of jealousy, bitters, and panther piss, street niggas put that bomb in their mouths and inhale and exhale, inhale and exhale, smoking it as if they are driving by The White House in hopes of making the air too thick. Sucking and puffing on the northern tip to get high in seeming endless fashion, they viciously fire up, cop n' blow; their "sole/soul"

purpose is to make the rest of the joint—Manhattan is “chronic,” they say—turn invisible like them.

Towards the Harlem River where people are wasted royally and the stench is bad, me and my partners dip in and out of the speakeasies and hit the jump joints, stopping outside only to ask where The Cotton Club is.

“Jesus, how is it the clouds still hang on you?” Herod asks, sniffing a bottle of coke and closely eyeing the white skin on the flaky parts of his body.

“This nigga is really working your nerve,” my left brain says.

“God, my heart must sit still tonight,” I say to myself, glancing at Herod caining/Caining over my shoulders. He snorts in clusters.

“Where we at?” Sportin’ News asks, staring around blankly as if to suggest that he is lost. His vision ain’t too good. Kind of superficial, Sportin’ News deals a lot in plastic. But this time, he’s sincere: He puts his Diner’s Club back in his pocket; the card is hot.

“This used to be Lenox Avenue and 143rd Street,” I tell them. I’m not really positive. (Several small boys are running around, picking hotwater cornbread off the ground and cotton balls out of one another’s nappy hair. They come to us in sections, their brown dusty fros attaching themselves to Herod and Horatio and Sportin’ News like basketballs made of smelly velcro.)

“So *this* is The Cotton Club?” Sportin’ News responds. “Man, get real!” He temporarily breaks loose, cutting himself away from the crumbsnatchers, his stick figure warped in all of the darkness like Zeus’ Caliban in *The Clash of the Titans*.

I look over and give Sportin’ News the evil eye, cursing him, my black clothes flapping harshly like a bat in the nightwind. “Sportin’ News, you are that dark thang that I acknowledge mine,” I tell him.

Sportin’ News doesn’t take it personal because he always thinks that he knows how to navigate through the sound and the fury. “Look,” he says, whipping out a Discover card, “don’t be mad.”

“Is Lena Horney or Count Basie or Frederick of Hollywood giggin’ there?” Herod asks, as we wander alongside of a brick wall with large wet holes in it, chunks of sedimentary rock tore out of it, as if the women of Brewster’s Place had tried to tear down the wall before a cold death rain washed them away. There is blood or rouge and prob-

ably dark eyeliner running down the side of the wall where “Harpo” is written in block letters, then in cursive just off to the right where we see “Black is.”

A threesome of ladies of the night stroll by in front of us, laughing and playing with one another (tossing their weaved hair and teasing us and each other) while Herod sings “Your love is ooh.” Showing off their negritude, all three stop when they see the writing on the wall. One of them, wearing a pair of hot pants and a big, cheap, metal cross hangin’ on a string around her neck, moves closer to the wall and points to our big heads and the places where the colors are badly smeared. “Lord, keep them safe since you can’t keep them sane,” she says.

Her girlfriend dashes over and snatches her. “You go, girl!” she shouts.

“We don’t want nothing to do with that,” the third one adds before they get lost in the woodwork.

I reach down and check out a black hole in the wall. In the dark, it’s hard to see anything more, so I rub the wall with my fingers and bend over to smell it.

“Jesus, when you gonna learn to simply stop sniffing around?” Herod asks. Herod likes the smell of paint. Scratching himself with the nails of a devil, he gestures/jesters like he still thinks that all of this madness is funny.

Since he’s talking so much out of the side of his neck, I slap him there with my opposite hand. “From here on, come wit me to Hell,” I said, “and mind your P’s and Q’s when we get there.” I can smell blood on my hands, and I start experiencing a yearning. But, Horatio is leaning on me, so I tell everybody to keep on truckin’.

“So is The Cotton Club down or what?” Herod asks. He’s trying to figure out where the nasty parties are at.

“Yep.” I’m lying like it’s nothing.

Satisfied, Herod and Sportin’ News jump ahead, trippin’ cause they obviously startled each other with their own greed and saliva.

“Count Basie can blow,” I hear Herod say. They walk away buggin’.

“Go on with your bad selves,” I shout. “In the ghetto, we are nothing but vampires, sleepwalkers created by European-folk lore! In fact,

my black mama was Harriet Tubman, you fraidy cats! She was the one responsible for putting me in a coffin in the first place!”

Herod and Sportin’ News march away like leftovers from the 369th Regiment, leaving the garbage to the crumbsnatchers and rug rats that are combing the kinky streets and searching in garbage; they pay the two brothers no attention.

I, too, am about to exit this scene, but I hear the sound of a snow tire and D.J. Jazzy Jeff (you can call him Fresh Prince of Bel-Air if you want) singing “Summertime, Summertime.”

“Somebody say somethin’ about a coffin?” a voice asks, with little kids in the street. It turns out to be a stereo-type driving a Sport Neon with at least eight speakers. Before the stereotype can say anything else, it has to fast forward and turn up the volume. Somewhat nervously checking its rearview, it’s clutching a forty-ounce bottle of Old English and talking over Michael Jackson singing “Man in the Mirror” as if it is toasting. The color of ink, it tries to smile at me like it is something other than a shit straight outta the pen. “I’m lookin’ for one,” it says. “I got two turntables, a Pioneer receiver, a large PA mike, and a mixer with an echo, but I need somethin’ to put all of this shit in.”

“Mister, I ain’t got jack.”

“Skip you, then,” it says and pulls off, cruising a bit as it creeps south, like we never talked, the car yelling as if it had no respect.

Just by glancing around, I remind myself that I’m from the old school. How do the ladies put it, “old-fashioned.” I open up my dashiki and back-slap this wino smoking faggots and chewing Brown’s Chicken. “You can sell out if you want to, homey, but I’m gonna stay short and funky.” (I have no idea of what all this means; I’m simply talkin’ rhetoric.) The drunk man shows me numerous alienated wallet-size people that he says are no longer here with us. But, Horatio is leaning on me, so I go on.

“Wait!” someone yells. It’s the drunk, no longer appearing quite as cheery now. He races up to me and moons me as if Horatio isn’t even there. “Kiss my black ass,” he says. I move closer to him, peek down, and chuckle. “I’ll be darn. Your ass is black.”

He sticks up the finger, his face waxed and nasty. The only thing I can do is look at him and shake my big head, the man slinging chicken

creatures up against the brick wall, dark wings and thangs flying everywhere as he sucks the bones like they were a lover's. I couldn't blame him for going off though. In my neighborhood, you got to half-doss in a blue funk if you want to be happy. "You need to get off the street," I tell him. "If I had a broom, I'd sweep your butt off myself."

The man slowly bends over and grabs a twig or some shit off the ground, hands it to me. "Go for what you know, Daddy-O," he says.

I kick over to him a twisted hanger that seems to have dried blood on it like somebody had once done an abortion on the very ground where we stand in conflict. He cuts me an uglier-than-sin glare when I start walking away, my face whacked. "Hang it up," I tell him. "Death don't scare me." But, Horatio is clinging on to me, so I back up.

"You ridin' high," I warn the drunk just before taking off.

He raises up, races up to me again, and jabs something hard in the small of my back. "Go head," I said. "Do me."

"Don't make me none," he says, his voice cracking up.

"Me neither," I said. "I've been stuck-up so many times, mugging has become En Vogue. That is to say, I even had a ladies' singing group hit me once and then ask me not to tell anybody. When I told them that I was born to sing, they said they could understand that and took off, splitting up and scurrying in a thousand different directions, all of the women swearing and cussing cause they had to run on high heels and clogs to get to the Grammy show on time."

"Nice sexy story with a feminine/feminist [sic] ending, but what makes you think I'd believe some hype like that?" the drunk asks. I see him looking confused, bombed; he tells me that the bridge of his nose is destroyed on the inside. "Too bad," I tell him. It was the only bridge he had that would allow him to escape the war-zone we all have to live in. Then I think of Herod, how his nose had been broken so terribly bad in that stupid takeover of a Black Man's Wheels that it remains deep/blue to this day and that, whenever he does cocaine, even his worst nightmares avoid asking him to smell or breathe any more.

"Your story stinks," the drunk says, getting up in my face. (Now I notice that there is pasta stuck to his back and clothes, and he is standing squinty-eyed and bowlegged as if in the middle of a spaghetti western.) "Ain't no gang of bulldyers or Queen B's in the USG gonna hit

you and leave without doing you in," he adds.

"What you want with me?" I ask. "Harlem is for niggas."

"I know that!" he shouts. "Shut up, or I'll put you away right now."

I feel his fist raise up against my head, but suddenly he quits.

"Don't gank him," I hear a boy say. When I turn to look, there is another kid beside him, and the two teeny-tiny boys are right up in our faces. Both of them are dressed rough; one has got his Brooklyn cap on backwards, and the other has some cheap price tags showing.

The drunk man tries to step off. He starts talking smack [aside]. How you like that? We gettin' ripped off by the new kids on the block. (He cracks up.)

The biggest kid does all of the yackety-yack, his eyes crossed like yin and yang. Give me yo' bus money, yo' food, and all the candy you old dudes got. No sticky stuff. And, be cool cause, if you don't, I'll get you off the bus in a minute. Believe dat.

What's up wit dis? I ask the old man. We getting juked by the little rascals.

The smaller kid snorts, and, like a wild horse, seems a little spooked. His crimey whips out some grass and gives it to him. Both start smoking. I hear Horatio cough "a little."

We was on the way to the Grammys when we saw you old monkeys out here signifying, the big kid says, his tee-shirt of the rapper Tupac Shakur exclaiming Dear Mama This Is How We Do It. The two kids circle us, pulling and tugging on their overalls which are on backwards.

Old dude got a nigger-flicker in his crew sock, I hear somebody whisper.

Obviously a bit fresh as far as knowing how to maintain his game, the smaller kid stops smoking and shines a mini flashlight towards my face like he is Green Lantern or Black Lightning.

Man, you come straight outta a comic book, the drunk yells. Like he can talk. Look, you little punks, he adds. (But this is now a translation of his language.) I ain't about to let a couple of kids dressed like caution signs scare me into giving up my valuables or goodies, he says. You militant midgets look like you accidentally stepped out in front of a graffiti writer tagging the subway, Jellybean Benitez or the uni-bomber.



Get the hell out of here before I sew up those holes you got in those doo-doo brown pants!

In the backdrop, a hoochie mama screams Brenda's got a baby to a copper and/or a very pink white boy wearing a beat-up blue hat, while the ghetto birds chop through the hot air, then call us out.

Lay down your weapons and line up against the wall, they demand, watching us carefully. As I said before, we are the real experimental players.

Now we all are swirling around and around in what looks like a sunny day. I see the others trying to locate me. Nigga, where are you, they scream. Damn nigga, you sho' are bright. I see black people trying to pass for white casually move down the street and away from the action. I see huge and petite black women cradling white babies charge out of the old, boarded-up grocery stores and stroll in the direction of Manhattan like they are somebody's nannies, their arms either too fat or too frail. I see a lot of beady heads shaking like coffee beans or cocoa seeds or Brazilian nuts (nigga toes we call them) near the stoop of Bethel A.M.E. Church, while Christian folk dressed in dark suits throw the bodies of other black men into a large crate, filing down the sharp wood pieces protruding inside the box before closing it, then strapping its bursting, laughing sides with battleship gray duct tape. I see Herod moving the crowd, Sportin' News carrying a Sprint card.

Now I am thinking gee whiz it's a street fight I hate street fights why of all people do I happen to be the one caught up in the cliché of a street fight, why, why, why.

Look here, mack daddy, the bigger boy tells the drunk, pushing dope in his face and dissing the rest of the crowd, especially myself and Horatio. We gettin' fuss'strated wit you adults trying to tell us what to do. You got no respect. Shut yo' fat mouth, or we'll squirt some heroin in yo' nose and make the bridge blow. Believe dat!

Suddenly out of nowhere, a woman holding a non-stick skillet busts in between us and snatches the smaller boy out of the circle. What you doing out in the street fighting again? she asks. You know better than that. Lord, I cain't even go to work without one of my babies trying to kill himself.

It's over, the drunk starts screaming.

What you say?! What you say?! The bigger kid starts screaming. We

all can barely hear over the noise and the technological wind smothering each other's Nommo/words like we are muted.

Horatio is pushing, and before I know it somebody rushes up and drops us to the earth like body bags. And then I hear all kinds of crazy noises. A rubber breaks. The stereo-type who confronted me earlier drives back by, parks a few yards away, pulls out his player, and moves away from the vehicle. Then he makes the noise of silence. I imagine him gliding as if he is moonwalking. I even hear the noise of a stray chopper dicing stuff over an empty coke machine.

Sportin' News is close to me now, searching for his I.D.

Like we are in the battle royal or something, hue-man bodies are throwing themselves on top of us and change is running down the street like pancakes in a nursery rhyme. And before I know it, my lips are cut, and my mouth is swallowing large amounts of blood.

I hear the kid trippin'. If you've never been to the ghetto, then stay the fuck out of the ghetto, cause you wouldn't understand the ghetto! Believe dat!

I hear the coppers standing by, watching us. Niggers are what their mommas made them.

I hear the drunk moaning and groaning.

Then I hear Horatio, snapping [the softest thing cannot be snapped, I remember reading from Bruce Lee's *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*], screaming at the top of his lungs like a cancer is eating him up terribly inside. Look, G, he screams, seemingly choosing his words carefully, you have been slain in the spirit I mean you have been stuck stabbed dead'n eighty-sixed slugged slobbered upon soaked soiled sodden solaced soularized [sic] stained indeed you have been staked!

Jesus! Herod says, hanging on to a hooker or something that keeps trying to put the lips of a rather large coke bottle on his mouth; as soon as Herod takes his eyes off her, she winks, acknowledging her secret goal of trying to poison him. Jesus! Herod says. You are slain! No drug in the world or false idol can do you any good now!

Here's yet some liquor left, his prostitute says, and I feel the alcohol being poured all over me. This is when I know.

O', I am dead, Herod Horatio Hor . . .

I glance at the crowd moving around me only to end up fixated

upon a long tired brown worm dragging its ugliness in sections over my palm. Anal, the worm momentarily pauses to knot himself. Taking his sweet time, he stares at me before resuming his crawling as if to signify that his grotesqueness is in my face and that it ain't go nowhere and that whacking it would do me no good because it would simply grow back. When the worm hits my left hand, a ring that had always lived large on my finger slips off, and out of nowhere the stereo-type races over, opens its door while on the move, bends way down, and snatches it off the ground, the car still laughing while running. There is no policing now; no cameras or news reporters. Where are the clowns, I ask myself, also wondering why, despite the fact that he's never had a job, Sportin' News is flashing a HMO Principal Health Care Provider's card and a Blue Cross and Blue Shield. While I am losing a lot of blood from my wounds, my eyelids stick together, then rapidly and involuntarily blink as if responding to stimuli, when I think about myself rising up from the dead as an ice/white person, when I envision myself coming back to prey upon hue-man beings. Before I can stop or finish with The Dream, I hear Sportin' News already spreadin' the word, shouting at the drugged-out people blowing old Negro spirituals and looking wack while they rest on their stoops in some of the most depressed areas of the ghetto. When Sportin' News tells them that I have quit, they all step back and seemingly fish for a church and a cross.

Then I hear Herod. "Jesus!" he screams, reaching down to see if I am still alive. "What you pour my alcohol on the nigga for?!" he asks the hooker. Herod reaches over further like he's going to lick the loose juice off of my body. But, this time, I am batty. This time, instead of slapping him, I bite this dirty nigga bastard crimey in front of the hot-blooded female right where his veins are already doing the Jim Jones, I mean, turning blue black from the scars and minstrel role and weak shit. I hear Herod's heart furiously pumping blood as if his body has been spiked with Kool-Aid.

Now we both are the wretched of the earth, I tell Herod. Herod is vomiting. Black skins, white masks, I add. Herod is collapsing and crying, breaking down right in front of my face. It's just too bad that I can't get my mind out of the ghetto, I say. Now Herod is down. After

all, the violence, I shout out (Herod is crawling away like he is begging to go home quickly), this violence can amaze or play past you but also take you by surprise before you know it if you don't watch it.