

Class Status and the Construction of Black Masculinity

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Abstract

Black Masculinity—as a subfield of Gender Studies—is tailored to study the typical behaviors of African American males. Literature on this subject claims that stereotypical characteristics of Black men have been shaped by centuries of racial subjugation and response to economic oppression. I contend in this article that Black Masculinity and its attributes are decreasingly influenced by one's racial designation and are more influenced by class status. Entering the twenty-first century, behavioral attributes typically associated with Black Masculinity—such as violent compulsion and criminality, frequent womanizing, and homophobia—are more closely linked to class than to race. Growing racial tolerance and media access to Black culture has allowed for the spread of these attributes across racial boundaries. Considered intolerable to progressive American society, these behaviors tend to surface when poor opportunity structure limits the expression of patriarchal male power.

Masculinity and the Construction of Black Identity

The most popular representations of 'gender'—a social construct engineered out of the toolkit of culture—tend to be determined by the dominant institutions of a given society. Like race, many mistakenly assume that the behavioral attributes of gender are born out of biological impulse. We often fail to realize that the conventions associated with masculine or feminine expression are determined for us by our society, and not by genetic predisposition. Pierre Bourdieu claimed that the:

social world constructs the body as a sexually defined reality.....(T)he biological differences between the sexes.....can thus appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between the genders. ¹

Masculine expectations—especially in a traditional patriarchal society—often obligate men to exhibit strength, aggressiveness, dominance over women, and sometimes violent superiority over other men. Outside of the past one hundred years, most societies accepted patriarchal dominance as part of the natural order. 'The division between the sexes appears to be 'in the order of things,' as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal, natural, to the point of being inevitable.' ²

Within the sociological study of gender, Black Masculinity—masculine attributes ascribed to African American³ men—insinuates more exaggerated forms of patriarchal expression. For scholars of this subfield, aggressiveness, sexual domination, and violent superiority are said to be magnified in African American men. These embellishments of masculine attributes are shaped by a long heritage of enforced racial stereotypes, media interpretations of race and poverty, and contributions to gender identity by political leaders.

Many scholars⁴ within this subfield would claim that the characteristics of Black Masculinity are uniform amongst all African American males, and these attributes are a continuous response to institutionalized racism and economic oppression. I contend in this article that in the twenty-first century, the behaviors associated with Black Masculinity are more shaped by class status and therefore these behaviors are not uniform amongst all African American men. In fact, one could argue that there is a wide range of behavioral subgroups within Black Masculinity.

Black Masculinity—as a measurable set of conventions—has traditionally included the most dangerous

and nihilistic forms of patriarchal expression. As is described by Robert Staples in *Black Masculinity*, the Black male's 'cultural image is usually one of several types: the sexual superstud, the athlete, and the rapacious criminal.'⁵ In general, twentieth-century scholars agreed that the attributes of Black Masculinity included a magnified sexual appetite, a penchant for violent dominance, hostility towards homosexuality, and a 'cool' attitude in the face of economic or intellectual inferiority. Those who subscribe to these notions expect Black males to exhibit violent criminal behavior and an extraordinary desire for sexual conquest over women. This image has been propagated in US entertainment media—including movies, music, and television shows—for decades. The Black male as a criminal, 'pimp/player,' or violent antagonist are all commodified characterizations of African American men in the popular American lexicon.

Without question, these widely viewed stereotypes were born out of centuries of institutionalized racial subjugation and the simultaneous fascination and fear of these attributes by White Americans. As a media commodity, Black men embody both the most feared and desired category of manhood in American society. As explained by Richard Majors and Janet Billson in *The Cool Pose*:

Denied access to mainstream avenues of success, they have created their own voice. Unique patterns of speech, walk, and demeanor express the cool pose. This strategic style allows the black male to tip society's imbalanced scales in his favor.⁶

What Majors and Billson call the 'cool pose' allows a person with no physical capital to possess a form of cultural capital. Especially in the American entertainment industry, African Americans have historically been the architects of new styles of dress, attitudes, and slang.

America's fascination with Black forms of expression began in the nineteenth century with the caricatures displayed in Minstrel Shows, which often featured White actors dressing up in 'Black face' in order to act out the worst stereotypes of African American slaves. Minstrel Shows date back to the 1830s and eventually became the most popular form of American entertainment in the post-bellum 1870s. Although the notion of 'savage Africans' dates back to seventeenth century tales of European exploration of Africa, the Black stereotypes that remain today have their roots in the fear perpetuated during the Reconstruction Era of the United States.

The most popular Vaudeville acts in the late nineteenth century included the decades-old characters of Jim Crow, Mr. Tambo, and Zip Coon, who embodied the perceived intellectual inferiority, laziness, and gluttony of African American slaves.⁷ White audiences of Vaudeville and Minstrel shows preferred the non-threatening characterizations of African Americans over the more dangerous stereotypes. Thus, began the conceptualization of the 'good negro' (safe negro) and 'bad negro' (more dangerous).

As working class White Americans adjusted to Reconstruction Era America after slavery, many promoted the stereotype of the violent/ rapacious Black male in order to justify the solidification of legal segregation in the 1890s. African American men were equated with animals: physically strong, sexually unrestrained, and intellectually inferior. Further, as African Americans attempted to position themselves in the late nineteenth century industrial economy, tales of Black criminality began to grow exponentially.

Backed by the scientific community at the height of the Social Darwinist Era, many believed that the evolution of the African male was headed toward sexual barbarism. As noted by Arthur Saint-Aubin, 'whereas superiority was to be linked to skull size and intelligence, inferiority was to be linked to sexuality.'⁸ The myth of the 'Black Rapist' fed the American psyche and still feeds notions of Black male hyper-sexuality to this day. Many of the Black Codes (laws in the American South solely directed at African Americans) between 1890 and 1960 made it illegal for African American men and White

women to have any physical contact.

As the myth of the hyper-sexual Black male grew throughout the twentieth century, many African American men began to embrace it and a large proportion of US society slowly began to grow a curiosity for it. Record companies during the Jazz and Rock 'n' Roll eras sought African American artists that were 'cool and safe,' but often audiences still found them to be mysterious and dangerous. According to bell hooks in her book *We Real Cool*:

By the end of the seventies the feared yet desired black male body had become as objectified as it was during slavery, only a seemingly positive twist had been added to the racist sexist objectification: the black male body had become the site for the personification of everyone's desire . . . Many black males are simply acquiescing, playing the role of sexual minstrel.⁹

Because the American audience has a curiosity for the exotic, many African American men today take advantage of these stereotypes. As is noted by Staples:

A review of the record of White beliefs about black sexuality casts in bold relief the view that "for the majority of White men, the Negro represents the sexual instinct in its raw state."¹⁰

Obsession with Black male genitalia dates as far back as the writings of Aristotle¹¹ and continues to bolster conceptions of Black male sexuality today.

Of all the Black male stereotypes created over the last 150 years that of the violent criminal has been methodically cultivated, commodified, and outright embraced by US society. In the 1960s, Black Masculinity was reshaped by the newly acquired political power of the Civil Rights Era. Notions of the 'good negro' (or obedient/deferential negro) were purposefully destroyed and replaced with a more defiant/revolutionary representation. The 1960s-70s played a pivotal role in the creation of this violent male identity. Specifically, the combination of the media's portrayal of the antagonistic Black Power Movement, and record crime rates in African American neighborhoods, created feared images of African American men.

Government forces—in particular, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—found the image of the revolutionary Black male to be too threatening to national security, therefore, they acted to dismantle most Black Power organizations in the 1970s. Concurrent with FBI policies, economic forces drove African American neighborhoods deeper into poverty. The destruction of Black leadership—combined with depression-level conditions in poor neighborhoods—left a void in Black male identity that would later be filled (for some) with narcissistic self-preservation and violent undertakings. As Christopher Lasch would argue in *The Culture of Narcissism*, in the wake of a failing economy, US culture in general was turning toward selfish pursuits.¹²

As the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements screeched to a halt in the 1970s, cultural identity in the Black community began to take on new directions. With a void in mainstream Black leadership, Black identity fractured along class lines. Political gains won during the Civil Rights Era no longer confined middle-class Blacks to northern industrial ghettos and economically depressed rural southern settlements. William Julius Wilson in his book *When Work Disappears* noted that the 'black flight' from urban ghettos allowed some African Americans to seek enclaves of people with similar economic backgrounds, while worsening the conditions of those left in segregated neighborhoods.¹³

Economic fracturing of African American communities also propagated a split in racial identity. Upwardly mobile African Americans sought to live out Martin Luther King's 'dream' of mainstream equality by attempting to shed the previous stereotypes. This desire was decades old. As was said by Mark Anthony Neal in *New Black Man*:

Image-making among elite black men dates back to the early twentieth century when black men like W.E.B Du Bois, Alan Locke, and others began to circulate terms like the “talented tenth” and the “new negro” in an effort to challenge racist depictions of black folk, but black men in particular.¹⁴

Grounded in the ethos of ‘self-love,’ the Black middle class sought to establish an identity based on economic achievement.

Poor and working class African Americans, on the other hand, had seen their opportunity structure worsen as they took a direct hit by mass deindustrialization. Black identity in poorer communities followed the attributes of masculine patriarchal domination as a response to economic subjugation. Many saw embracing negative stereotypes as a form of empowerment and self-realization. American media latched onto these representations as they confirmed stereotypes of old and catered to a growing interest in viewership.

The use of violence, as it is connected to Black male identity, became the norm for the protection of one’s person and property by poor urban men in the 1980s and 1990s. Traditional American patriarchal norms encourage men to seek some form of dominance over others, whether that dominance is sexual, economic, or physical. When all other forms of dominance are limited, manhood often calls for the expression of power, even if that power is gained through violence. According to Majors and Billson:

Violence [at the end of the twentieth century] has become a readily available and seemingly realistic tool for achieving these critical social rewards; it is in this sense that violence can even become a form of achievement when everything else has failed.¹⁵

For working class and working poor African American men at the end of the twentieth century, the combination of historical racial oppression, mass economic abrogation, and continued media celebration of patriarchal gender socialization cemented the stereotypes of Black Masculinity that remain in the twenty-first century.

The Commodification of Black Stereotypes

Today, within the context of American popular culture, violence, homophobia, and hyper-sexuality—though considered by many to be undesirable—are fashionable commodities for many young boys of all races. Old modes of patriarchal domination are being bought and sold in mainstream action movies, Hip Hop music, ‘gangsta’ films,¹⁶ and even primetime television programming.

Certain attributes of Black Masculinity—what many label as ‘ghetto’—were not embraced until the 1970s, as was seen in ‘Black exploitation’¹⁷ films. Black gangsta culture (celebrating African American male criminals as heroes) was born out of small films such as *Superfly* (1972) and *The Mack* (1973), but they were not typically viewed outside of Black audiences. As working class African Americans sought new identity construction in the 1970s, these films offered a template. But some segments of the Black community criticized these films for profiteering from negative stereotypes.

Like Black films of the 1970s, Hip Hop music is often chastised for latching onto the most damaging Black stereotypes and reproducing them for mass consumption. Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Moore emphasize in *Deconstructing Tyrone* that this relationship between mass media and Black identity creates a conundrum for African American entertainers. ‘We’re stuck either “correcting” old images of black masculinity or remaking them for profit.’¹⁸ From the days of Blues singer Bessie Smith and her hit record *Me and My Gin* (1920) to the present, African American entertainers have had to grapple with whether to embrace these stereotypes in order to gain wealth, or risk financial failure by staying ‘true’ to themselves.

Hip Hop—America’s most commercially successful ‘Black music’—initially gained interest outside of African American communities in the 1980s. This innovative art form offered a range of genres, including dance music, love songs, and ‘conscious records,’ as Rap artists spoke out against poor conditions in urban ghettos. ‘Conscious’ records were a mini-revival of the pride preached during the Black Power Movement. Platinum-selling artists such as Chuck D (of Public Enemy) encouraged Black pride and self-love, all while believing that giving into negative Black stereotypes was a way of ‘selling out’. At the time, to ‘sell out’ meant that a Black artist would willfully pantomime Black stereotypes for financial gain.

Throughout the 1980s, Hip Hop primarily remained a ‘Black music’ until the release of a groundbreaking album in 1989. Niggas with Attitude’s (N.W.A.) *Straight Outta Compton* put record companies on notice as young suburbanites thirsted for a radically different type of music. Something about the nihilistic tales as portrayed by N.W.A. appealed to young White male audiences.

Obscured by the neo-Afro centric energy in Hip Hop, ‘gangsta’ Rappers believed that by foregoing the smiling, dancing, and non-controversial language of the stereotypical ‘safe negro’, they were staying true to African American goals of self-realization. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, gangsta Rappers ended up embracing the decades-old stereotype of the violent ‘rapacious’ Black male. As gangsta Rap gained popularity in the 1990s, Hip Hop as a whole became commercially viable. The commodification of gangsta culture drove other genres of Hip Hop deeper into obscurity and set the ‘pop’ standards for today.

Hip Hop artists in the 1990s did not garner much success until they began to attract a large White audience; and White audiences wanted it ‘gangsta’. Such breakthrough albums as Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* (1992, EMI Distribution) were a hit among White youth. Even though Rappers continued to talk about the dangerous conditions of urban ghettos, White youth could relate to the endangered aspects of US patriarchal culture: desire for material wealth, dominance over women, and violence as a respected means to an end. Outside of Hip Hop, 1990’s American pop culture preached equality for women, sensitivity for men, and tolerance for all forms of race, color, and sexual orientation. In a peak era of political-correctness and multi-culturalism, gangsta Rap offered an opportunity for young boys to experience the more classical attributes of patriarchal masculinity.

In the 1990s, Hip Hop’s definition of Black manhood began to narrow. In her book *Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose lamented, ‘Since the mid to late 1990s, the social, artistic, and political significance of figures like the gangsta and street hustler substantially devolved into apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes.’¹⁹ Moving away from the ideals of the 1960’s Black Power Movement—and instead borrowing from the legends of early twentieth century Italian-American gangsters—gangsta Rappers combined the attributes of nineteenth century patriarchal masculinity with the party music of the 1970s-80s. Rose contends that these images of the Black male are ‘exaggerated and distorted by a powerful history of racial images of black men as ‘naturally’ violent and criminal’²⁰.

Gangsta Rap preached the requisite use of violent capital as the only means of maintaining masculine domination. For example, New York City-based Hip Hop group *Mobb Deep* emphasized the necessity to use violence—and not just talk about it—in their hit single *Shook Ones part II* (1995). In this song, Mobb Deep spoke directly to other Rap artists whom they believed were ‘fake criminals’. The use of violence—particularly with handguns—became essential for street credibility and subsequent entrance into the Hip Hop industry. This also solidified the suggested use of violence as a singular path to manhood for working poor African American boys.

Defiant attitudes — as portrayed in 1960’s Black Masculinity — were reshaped into defiance against

legal codes in the 1990s. Empowering oneself included rebelling against all structures of power, even if it served no political purpose. Suddenly, the most negative stereotypes of what was considered to be 'ghetto' were being celebrated by 'keeping it real'. As stated by Cora Daniels in *Ghetto Nation*:

An argument could be made that this pride, this embracing of everything we are, the good as well as the bad, is somehow an aggressive way to erase feeling marginalized, which in the end can be an empowering act.²¹

This commercialization of 'ghetto' has resulted in new fashions and has contributed to new trends in "cool" Black posturing.

For the young male audience who can most relate to Rap artists, gangsta Rap creates a new template for manhood. Sexual dominance over women, get-rich-quick schemes, and the willingness to use violence to protect one's reputation became a foundation for Black male identity by the mid-1990s. Gangsta Rap eliminated the 'safe negro', and as a result, many became concerned about the nihilistic consequences of Hip Hop's role models.

It is precisely Hip Hop's rebellious nature—without clearly defined political objectives—that attracts Hip Hop's greatest critics. 1990's stalwart Tupac Shakur preached the loosely construed ethos of 'thug life', which many interpreted as a lifetime dedication to lawbreaking behavior. The 'thug' became a staple in Hip Hop after the 1990s and often celebrated an acquired criminal record. Had Tupac had more time to articulate its meaning before his death in 1996, 'thug' could have been a call to eradicate old modes of identity formation.

Gangsta Rappers had an outlet to express violent frustration, but lacked the templates for politically-correct intonation. Many of Hip Hop's critics therefore viewed the music as dangerous to youth. Proponents of Hip Hop, view this critique as misguided. As is said by Eric Michael Dyson in *Know What I Mean?*:

It's true that those who fail to wrestle with Hip Hop's cultural complexity, and approach it in a facile manner, may be misled into unhealthy forms of behavior. But that can be said for all art, including the incest-laden, murder-prone characters sketched in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.²²

More important in Hip Hop—from the 1980s to present—is the illumination of problems effecting urban ghettos. 'At its best, hip hop gives voice to marginal black youth we are not used to hearing from on such topics.'²³

Of course, to claim that Hip Hop is dangerous is to incite the argument that 'life imitates art'. As said by Rose: 'The criticism that hip hop.....causes violence relies on the unsubstantiated but widely held belief that listening to violent stories or consuming violent images *directly* encourages violent behavior.'²⁴ According to the thinking of 'life imitates art' critics, a culture with so many violent media outlets should produce a record number of violent criminal imitations. It is short-minded to say that music has a direct correlation to violent behavior, but to assume that Hip Hop has no influence on working poor African American boys would fail to recognize that widely publicized role models do offer a guide for manhood in communities that lack real male role models.

Popular media outlets continue to perpetuate old notions of Black Masculinity even as they are no longer influenced by legalized racism and institutions dedicated to racial superiority. As a result, acceptable forms of Black masculine expression have continued to narrow. As said by Byron Hurt in his film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, for young African American men who've grown up listening to Hip Hop: 'It's like we're in this box. In order to be in that box you have to be strong; you

have to be tough; you have to have a lot of girls.....you have to dominate other men, other people.'²⁵

For young men who choose to embrace manufactured norms of Black Masculinity, there are obvious consequences. Ritualistic movement up the status ladder of Black Masculinity requires competent violent expression, domination over women, and domination over men who don't measure up. The real consequences tend to go beyond the individual. According to Athena Mutua in *Progressive Black Masculinities*: 'Black men's embrace of ideal masculinity not only hurts black women, but also hurts black men and black communities as a whole.'²⁶

A popular theme when discussing 'Black male crisis' is the topic of racial disparity in prisons.²⁷ One could claim that Black masculine status positioning contributes to the large number of incarcerated African American men. But as I will illustrate in the following section, one's race is less of an indicator of potential criminal behavior than is class status. African Americans do comprise 40 per cent of incarcerated men, but more important, 62 per cent of the prison population in the United States comes from households that are below the poverty line.²⁸ As we progress through the twenty-first century, we have to recognize the influence of class as being more important than race.

The Influence of Class in the Construction of Black Masculinity

As the stereotypical attributes of Black Masculinity have been a part of the American psyche for more than two centuries, I argue that African American males who behave according to these stereotypes do so because of the influence of class status. In fact, I also argue that White's of similar class status are more likely to live by the attributes of this exaggerated patriarchal masculinity than are middle class African Americans.

As was argued by William J. Wilson in *The Declining Significance of Race*, since the de-legalization of racism during the Civil Rights Era, African Americans are experiencing a greater diversity in economic class status than ever before in US history. 'There are clear indications that the economic gap between the black underclass and the higher income blacks will very likely widen and solidify.'²⁹ Prior to the 1950s, almost half of all African Americans lived below the poverty line. Today, it is less than one-quarter. And as African Americans begin to experience a divergence in class situation, this will also spell differences in cultural expectations of masculinity.

Although institutionalized racism created many of the stereotypes for Black male identity, current socioeconomic forces are more influential in pushing segments of the African American male population toward the stereotypes of the past. While we might view Black Masculinity as a purely racial phenomenon, violence, homophobia, hyper-sexuality, and criminality are more closely linked to class than one's racial designation. Working class and working poor families across racial boundaries tend to lean more heavily on patriarchal norms—i.e. the father/husband as the breadwinner—while upward class mobility has allowed many middle and upper class men and women to 'free' themselves of these norms. A wealthy man, for example, does not need to exert violent force in order to demonstrate his dominion over others. For a working poor man, violent capital and womanizing may be the only forms of power that he has left to exert.

The masculine traits that characterize Black Masculinity are more pronounced as one descends the economic ladder. The disproportionate amount of African American men in prison may just be a byproduct of class situation. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 'over 20 per cent of young African American men live in poverty compared to 18 per cent of Hispanic men, 12 per cent of Asian men, and 10 per cent of White men.'³⁰

If we look at two different African American cohorts with different class situations, there is a wide disparity in criminal activity. Take for example in the New York City metropolitan area, the borough of

the Bronx has one of the largest concentrations of African Americans in the city (43 per cent) and one of the highest crime rates per 1,000 residents (9.8).³¹ The Bronx as a whole has a median household income of \$35,080 per year.

Hempstead, a suburban town in the New York metropolitan area, has an even larger African American population (53 per cent), but a lower crime rate per 1,000 residents (5.64). This may be in part due to the higher class situation, as the median household income for Hempstead is \$45,234.³²

According to Wilson, as racial subjugation has been 'substantially reduced,' this has allowed for greater divisions in Black culture.³³ In 2004, African American actor and comedian Bill Cosby made some controversial remarks while distancing himself from the working poor stereotypes of Black Masculinity. At an appearance at the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition & Citizenship Education Fund's annual conference, he was quoted as saying:

You've got to stop beating up your women because you can't find a job, because you didn't want to get an education and now you're (earning) minimum wage. You should have thought more of yourself when you were in high school, when you had an opportunity.³⁴

Much of Cosby's commentary was directed at poor African Americans. Those who embody these stereotypes often reference the continued lack of political power and disenfranchisement in poor African American communities. Cosby addressed this by saying, 'it is almost analgesic to talk about what the White man is doing against us.....it keeps you frozen in your hole you're sitting in (sic).' ³⁵

Middle class and upper class African Americans chastise Black youth for their failings. One way of moving up the status ladder is to vehemently negate and reconstruct the stereotypes of old. As is said by Athena Mutua:

Elitist comments reflecting class position—perhaps inadvertently—blame the poor for their own poverty and though directed specifically against poor blacks, also suggest that black people in general are to blame for their own oppressed conditions. They thereby reinforce both classist and racial stereotypes.³⁶

Even in the upper-echelons of the Black community, African American youth are faced with the exploration of Black Masculinity at some point.

Across class lines, African American adolescents often wrestle with these attributes as they are discovering their own personal identity. In her book *Why Are All of the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Daniel Tatem claimed that young boys following the expectations of Black Masculinity are not choosing stereotypical 'black posturing' because of racial assumptions alone; rather, theirs is a choice compelled by bridging the maturity gap between childhood and adulthood in adolescence:

As children enter adolescence, they begin to explore the question of identity, asking "Who am I? Who can I be?" in ways they have not done before. For Black youth, asking "Who am I?" includes thinking about "Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?"³⁷

For middle class African American boys, criminal or deviant behavior tends to fade with age.

The exploration of Black Masculinity does not always lead to criminal behavior. Even amongst adolescents, crime is more closely linked to class. The US Department of Justice's *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report* claims that 'juvenile law-violating behavior is (more so) linked to family structure and to school/work involvement.'³⁸ According to the report, African American and White youth had similar murder rates, and rates of sexual assault were greater for White youth. Over the past decade, race has become less of a factor in juvenile delinquency as contact with the work world weighs more heavily:

Juveniles who were neither in school nor working had a significantly greater risk of engaging in a wide range of problem behaviors—using marijuana and hard drugs, running away from home, belonging to a gang, committing a major theft or serious assault, selling drugs, and carrying a handgun.³⁹

As American culture is becoming more racially tolerant—and White youth have greater access to Black culture—the deviant behavior that is typically associated with Black Masculinity is a palpable choice for young boys across racial boundaries.

The combination of class and race make the assimilation of Black Masculinity more conceivable to particular youth. Many Black male role models in popular media preach these attributes as the norm, and therefore send mixed signals to young African American boys attempting to construct their own identity. For African American boys growing up in poor communities, class expectation and racial expectation converge to amplify the most precarious patriarchal norms. Respect and honor are important working class values, but these have to be earned. Without a strong opportunity structure, young boys in disadvantaged neighborhoods often seek honor and respect through illegal routes and the use of violent capital.

The successful path for middle class youth—good grades in school and well-paying employment, for example—are often not available or do not produce the same social rewards as illegal activity. Poor youth often encounter peer pressure to be truant from school, to use illegal drugs, and to engage in violent grand-standing. Although deviant—and in many instances criminal—this path promises wealth, a bounty of popularity and respect, and a chance at real power over nihilistic surroundings.

Within a scarce opportunity structure, traditional patriarchal expressions of masculine dominance are limited to violence and illegal means of obtaining wealth. Mass incarceration, joblessness, and men's diminishing role in the available services economy—according to Phillipe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect*—can feel like 'an assault on (one's) masculine dignity.'⁴⁰ 'Hustling' can make an uneducated working-class man 'feel like a man' again, as he can assert his violent capital over other community members.

As is seen in popular media representations of urban criminal underworlds, the drug trade promises wealth, women, and, most importantly, higher social status amongst one's peers. In a society in which status stratification is an inevitable byproduct of capitalist desire, one can turn others' fear of violence into fast wealth, and as a result, earn street respect. In New York City's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, the use of violent capital (or the ability to make good on threats if necessary) has become the norm among certain young boys. The most impoverished neighborhoods in New York are either majority African American or Hispanic or a combination of both, and a particular type of masculinity has come to define what it means to be a young boy of color growing up in one of these neighborhoods.

The desire for patriarchal masculine expression in African American and Hispanic neighborhoods is often overlooked in the study of juvenile delinquency. Many talk about the racial disparity in the US prison system, but equally as disconcerting is the gender disparity. Young boys represent ninety two per cent of all youth detainees. This is more of a reflection of the struggle with twenty-first century cultural identity than of any biological differences between men and women. When legitimate means of success are off the table, men typically seek the more attainable rewards of what bell hooks calls 'imperialist, White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy'⁴¹. The pressure to 'act like a man' means more than paying family bills and has more detrimental implications on one's future than simple physical altercations. For African American adolescents, living up to traditional expectations of manhood has the potential to result in life imprisonment.

A Study of African American Youth in New York City

In 2008, I conducted qualitative interviews with ten African American youth from New York City to discuss the impact of the aforementioned social pressure on young boys. I chose five boys and five girls from some of the most economically depressed areas of the city. In the name of anonymity and confidentiality, I will provide them pseudo-names in this article. In separate interviews, I spoke with 'Byron', of the Edenwald neighborhood of the Bronx; 'Darryl', of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn; 'Antonio', of the Morris Park neighborhood of the Bronx; 'Ivy', of the Hollis neighborhood of Queens; 'Jessica', of the Kingsbridge neighborhood of the Bronx; 'Felix', of the Mott Haven neighborhood of the Bronx; 'Tariq', of the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan; 'Brianna', of the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn; 'Sheryl', of the St. Albans neighborhood of Queens; and 'Tanisha', of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn.

I wanted to engage them in a conversation about manhood and womanhood, and whether there was any more social pressure on young boys to act out any of the typical behaviors of Black Masculinity. I had initially asked them, 'What does it mean to be a 'man' ('woman')?' 'In your mind, what does this person have?' 'How is he (she) seen by other community members?' Most of the respondents had older working class notions of manhood. Seventeen year old Byron claimed that a man is 'someone who is fully responsible. A man should be responsible for everything. He got enough to be comfortable. He gets along with everyone. A man should have a job, apartment, a car, and he should finish his education.'

Nineteen year old Antonio claimed 'a man should be able to support his family. A man should have his own living situation. His own job where he can maintain himself. He doesn't need a kid or a woman, but as long as he has enough to take care of himself.' Eighteen year old Tariq claimed that a man 'gets respect from others. He takes care of himself and family in good and bad times. He has a good paying job. He got his own place. He's doing what he has to do.' Seventeen year old Felix said that a man is 'someone that can provide for himself'.

The young girls on the other hand had a much more modernized take on womanhood. In a traditional patriarchal structure, men are expected to work and women are expected to be caretakers of family and home. But many of these girls made more modernized claims. Nineteen year old Ivy said that when she thinks of the ideal woman: 'I think of stability. She is financially and emotionally independent.' Seventeen year old Brianna claimed that 'a real sister will not show her body, but she uses her intelligence. It's about your heart and your mind. Where your head is at (*sic*). A real woman is independent, but not afraid to ask for help.'

The girls focused on education and independence as keys to womanhood. Eighteen year old Jessica claimed that a 'real woman is college educated. She knows what she wants. She takes care of herself respectfully and doesn't judge others. No man is disrespectful towards her.' In a sense, many of the young girls claimed that womanhood involve the ability to distance oneself from dependence on men.

In the United States, and in New York City in particular, there is a growing achievement gap between young women of color and young men of color. African American women in particular are earning more college degrees, have higher employment rates, and—in the New York metropolitan area—are earning more per capita than their male counterparts. I asked my respondents to address this issue by asking them: 'Why is it that young women in communities of color seem to be having more success in college and the work world compared to young men?'

Many of the boys spoke about women's success as a response to oppression. Byron claimed, 'Since history, women have been down-graded (*sic*). Now they stepping up to dismiss the myths. Women

are tired.' Felix explained that girls have more pressure on them to do well in school, 'The things they go through are different. In order for girls to fit in, they have to do well in school. Guys try to fit in by making money.'

For both the boys and the girls, much of this achievement gap was blamed on the failings of young men. Tariq claimed that 'Men are just trying to hang out. They live to others expectations.' Brianna lamented, 'Guys have unrealistic fantasies. They all want to be Rappers.' Like Brianna, seventeen year old Sheryl believed that media had too much of an influence on young boys when she explained that:

Young men, they don't have fathers. They don't know how to become a man. All they know is the Rappers on television they try to emulate. Women want to be seen as a woman.

Throughout these interviews, I recognized that the young girls believed they had more freedom to shape the outcome of their futures, and therefore this could lead to more realistic success. They were in a position to forego older patriarchal norms, while the young boys were still trying to find their place in an opportunity structure that does not allow for the same type of success as generations past. I asked each of the teens whether there was 'social pressure on young boys to 'act' a certain way.' Byron explained:

Everybody wants to be macho. That's not manhood. The father figures out here might be street hustlers. And there are a lot of families without fathers. The mother can guide the daughter but can only do so much for the son.....Most of the young men out there are out looking for a father figure.

The majority of the respondents agreed that young boys are limited in their choices for gender identity. Jessica explained, 'They do what they do to look cool. They do it to have bragging rights. Boys think adulthood doesn't start until thirty.' Felix was adamant in his description of the pressure on boys:

Guys have way more pressure on them. They can't even go to school and get good grades. Guys function on envy. Who's doing what. Who's got the flyest girl. Who's got the nicest car.

Antonio also acknowledged that having material success is more important than educational success:

When it comes to the 'Hood', it's showing off what you got even if you don't got it. Even if you don't have a dollar in your pocket but you look like a million bucks, that's what's important.

Sixteen year old Tanisha recognized the function of role models in generating this pressure: 'It's more pressure on them because they're guys. It's not okay, though. Some see stereotypes and think it's the only alternative.'

Overall, the young boys were trying to fit themselves into the working class norms of old. They believed that men should be providers and should have the ability to support their families. The means of doing so was up for interpretation, and therefore could lead to illegal methods of obtaining wealth. The end goal is to gain wealth and display that wealth in order to garner respect and intrigue women. Even Ivy acknowledged that 'for boys, there is pressure to act like the top dog. For girls, they're out there looking for the top dog.'

Most of the respondents recognized the lack of positive role models for boys, particularly in poor African American communities. When asked about their ideal man or woman, most of the girls made references to their aunts, mothers, or sisters, while the boys tended to look towards male celebrities. The boys and the girls believed that many of the boys from their communities lacked father figures, and this left the door open for more misguided interpretations of what manhood entails.

Conclusions

African American boys growing up in the United States have a wide range of choices for gender identity; but these choices narrow as one begins to move down in class status. The behavioral attributes typically associated with Black Masculinity—aggressiveness and criminality, womanizing, and homophobic attitudes—are more tied to class status than family tradition or biological determinism. As racial tolerance and greater access to Black culture build up in the twenty-first century, the attributes of Black Masculinity are becoming more widely available and compatible to poor and working class youth of all races.

For working poor youth, encouragement to be involved in criminal activities appears to come from all directions, whether from the diminished expectations of society or the social pressures of local peer groups. According to Elijah Anderson in *The Code of the Streets*:

For these young people the standards of the street code are the only game in town. The extent to which some children—particularly those who through upbringing have become most alienated and those lacking in strong conventional social support—experience, feel, and internalize racist rejection and contempt from mainstream society may strongly encourage them to express contempt for the more conventional society in turn.⁴²

Black Masculinity is attractive to many youth searching for male identity. American society professes that these behaviors guarantee immediate social rewards amongst one's peers. From a young age, African American boys in particular are taught that they have been marginalized for centuries and that there is no reason for them to believe that this marginalization has ended.

A common sense reaction to these values is to forgo a legitimate world that does not accept them and to commit crimes as an act of defiance, or as a means of sustenance. Anderson calls this behavior 'oppositional culture'. Robert Merton would call this 'retreatism'⁴³, while Mitch Duneier refers to this as an 'extreme form of retreatism, rather than a form of resignation'⁴⁴. In this case, Black Masculinity is a form of retreat away from politically correct norms and toward a more accepting deviant subculture. As this type of masculine expression is a class-generated phenomenon, it is also a by-product of the lack of progress made in changing masculine codes, in general. For the past several decades, women have worked hard to redefine 'femininity' and 'womanhood', while 'manhood' has conceptually remained stagnant. According to Athena Mutua:

Men, though often having greater access to more material resources and opportunities, arguably may be much more limited in their human expression of themselves because they have more narrow traits, roles, and messages about how to be from which to draw on in constructing their identities.⁴⁵

Young men have their work cut out for them in trying to undo patriarchal norms of the past while simultaneously gaining social acceptance from their peers.

For adolescents, 'cool' is often measured by one's willingness to engage in delinquency. This is even true of middle class kids. Cora Daniels wondered:

Why does ghetto have such pull? Why would kids going to a school rich enough to give them laptops still feel the need to thug it out on the corner or pull a knife on a classmate?⁴⁶

Even among middle-class adolescents, seemingly nonsensical acts of violence occur with unexpected frequency.

Take, for example, the young boys in Garden City, New York (a wealthy suburb of New York City) who,

on one warm June night in 2009, decided to act out the then-famous video game *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Ranging in ages from fourteen to eighteen, these six boys walked the streets of Garden City and committed acts of assault, robbery, burglary, menacing, and two attempted auto thefts. When they were caught and asked why they did it, they simply said that they were 'bored.'⁴⁷ These boys were White and Asian teens from typical middle-class homes with stable family structures. They were not intoxicated or high on drugs. Analysts and politicians alike jumped to blame the video game and violent music, while none considered the social rewards the boys could gain amongst their peers. As it turned out, these boys were unpopular at their respective schools and were seeking to obtain status.

For young boys in lower economic strata, the pressure to be delinquent is magnified. The boys whom I interviewed in 2008 had internalized old working class patriarchal notions of manhood. They saw money as the means to all other social ends. They believed that if you possess large amounts of money, society rewards you in kind: you get the girls; you get the respect; you get 'nice' things. If the average drug dealer in New York City can make up to \$5,000 a week⁴⁸, and the average car thief can make \$10,000 a week, some see these behaviors as worth the use of violent capital, even if it goes against their principles.

But for all boys testing the waters of criminality, race is the least predictable factor in juvenile delinquency. According to a 2009 report composed by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (the New York agency that houses incarcerated youth), 'offense history, childhood maltreatment, prior receipt of child welfare services, and family environment were associated with heightened risk for adult antisocial behavior for both boys and girls'⁴⁹. Many of these factors are indicators of class structure rather than racial identification.

For young African American men in general, there is likely to be a separation from the attributes of Black Masculinity, especially as they climb the economic ladder. A new template is lacking, yet many authors have suggested directions for new Black manhood. Mark Anthony Neal, in particular, suggests that the 'New Black Man' should 'resist.....being inscribed by a wide range of forces and finding a comfort with a complex and progressive existence as a black man in America'⁵⁰. Mutua expands upon that progressivity by calling the future of Black manhood 'progressive black masculinity='. This includes not only resisting racial domination, but more importantly, resisting often ignored patriarchal domination of women.

The subfield of Black Masculinity as a whole is in flux. The behaviors associated with this field will remain for some time as long as boys are raised to prove their manhood through physical dominance and aloofness to danger. Essentially, as more African Americans join the ranks of the middle and upper classes, what we know of as Black Masculinity may eventually be called Working Poor Masculinity. The working class elements—such as the ability to provide for oneself and one's family—will always be a part of the foundation; but poor economic conditions will incite the more criminal components. Eventually, racial designation connected to these behaviors will be so blurred so as to remove the racial labels altogether.

Endnotes

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