

Gunfire In The Distance: Gangsta Rap and the American Search for Masculinity

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Coleman R. Mahler

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Committee members

Name: Ellen Schattschneider

Name: Chad Williams

Name: Charles Golden

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## Introduction

Gangsta rap came into existence in the late 1980s, rose to prominence in the early 1990s, and has maintained its popularity even through the present. It startled Americans; enraging some, delighting others, and revealing a generational divide between the baby boomers and their offspring, known as Generation X. Parents believed Gangsta rap was detrimental to the psychological wellbeing of their offspring, and the offspring didn't care. The popularity of rap music grew in the 1990s, in 1998 outselling country music, what had previously been the top selling genre in America<sup>i</sup>. That year, 81 million CDs, tapes, and albums were sold, and sales increased by 31% between 1997 and 1998<sup>ii</sup>. Rap was what those involved in the record industry called a 'crossover genre,' meaning it appealed to multiple demographics: by 1999, 70% of all rap, or hip-hop as it is also known, was purchased by whites<sup>iii</sup>. Gangsta rap represented an important part of this increase in total popularity of rap, with a large number of the best selling rap artists existing within the Gangsta genre. 2pac's 1996 album *All Eyez on Me* was certified 9x platinum in 1998 by the RIAA; Notorious B.I.G.'s album *Life After Death* has been certified diamond – selling over 10 million copies; and Eminem's album *The Marshall Mathers LP* has been certified 10x platinum.

Befitting its popularity and controversiality, there has been a large volume of scholarly literature devoted to understanding rap - including its context, impact on society, and morality. Some academics have argued that it is a reflection of authentic black street culture, art, and ideology<sup>iv</sup>; others have said that rap is merely corporate production at work, a form of cultural imperialism in which whites appropriate black culture, and that it does not adequately convey a holistic depiction of black life, pigeonholing black identity<sup>v</sup>; many conservatives have argued that it is merely a form of cultural perversion, representing the degeneration of American society, where unwanted elements attack American cultural

purity. What I have come to believe, after reading a diverse body of literature on the subject, is that Gangsta rap is many things, and different things to different people. Like all cultural phenomenon, it escapes full comprehension and is illusive by nature. But the question that has plagued my mind, and forms the basic impetus for my research, is this: why did Gangsta rap become popular in the first place? It is something that I have not read an adequate explanation for, most likely because it is an incredibly difficult question to answer. But it is also the most tantalizing question concerning Gangsta rap, because coming to an answer means coming to an understanding of a substantial portion of American history. Gangsta is indeed a crossover genre, and therefore represents the confluence of multiple aspects of American life, as well as the continuation of certain American trends, the exploration of which form the body of my research. Of course, my explanation is not the sole reason Gangsta blew up; rather it is only one of many. But hopefully it will add a unique perspective on the emergence of this musical genre.

### **American Masculinity**

Gangsta rap is about the archetype of the Gangsta. The life of the Gangsta is filled with uncertainty, violence, sexual conquest, and freedom. The Gangsta walks through urban neighborhoods that have been rejected by the rest of society, autonomous, and proud. On the surface, the Gangsta is calm, collected, unhesitating. He is focused on money, and the attainment of it, which leads to even greater freedom. But he does not sacrifice his freedom through traditional forms of labor, and instead works as a hustler, an entrepreneur who finds ways to make a buck without selling himself or conforming to mainstream standards. In short, he (and the Gangsta is almost exclusively male) attempts to live his life to the fullest in a frontier landscape, where life is exceedingly difficult and full of reward and frustration.

The Gangsta is representative of a particular form of American masculinity: ‘rugged individualism,’ one of two main forms that have existed since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, emerging with the industrialization of the American economy – the other form being ‘marketplace manhood.’ Both these forms, and combinations of them, are the two main masculinities that American men have ascribed to (or not), and it is the story of the evolution of these two forms throughout history that explains the rise of the Gangsta, and of Gangsta rap.

These forms have their roots in the industrialization of the United States economy. In *The History of Men*, Kimmel describes their evolution and rise. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American masculinity had two archetypes, both representing differing American social groupings. The “Genteel Patriarch” was the ideal manhood to which the landed gentry aspired to attain<sup>vi</sup>. It was a holdout from the colonial roots of the nation, when the landed aristocracy was expected not to perform labor, but rather cultivate himself artistically and intellectually. In cities, the masculine ideal was represented by the archetype of the “Heroic Artisan,” a master craftsman “who embodied the physical strength and republican virtue of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer and independent artisan,<sup>vii</sup>” and representative of the new democratic ideas becoming popularized in the early years of the American experiment.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, two new archetypes (rugged individualism and marketplace manhood) would become idolized, due to structural changes in American life. Two changes in particular caused the changing of cultural patterns in America: industrialization and the opening and expansion of the frontier. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American’s economic underpinnings changed, with industry and business becoming more and more important, manifesting in the development of a laissez faire capitalist economy. Industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie, Leland Stanford, and others became part of the national imagination, and the importance of merchants in American life increased. Marketplace manhood reflected the changing nature of the American economy. The new American man, Kimmel writes

“...derived his identity entirely from success in the capitalist marketplace, from his accumulated wealth, power and capital. The manhood of the urban entrepreneur, the businessman, was restless, agitated, devoted to his work in the homosocial public arena. He was thus an absentee landlord at home and an absent father to his children.<sup>viii</sup>”

For both new forms of masculinity – rugged individualism and marketplace manhood, separation from women and femininity would be crucial. Neither of these identities was based around contact with women, but rather with creating a disconnect with women, and controlling all situations involving them. Marketplace manhood required controlling the social sphere at home, including one’s wife and children.

Not everybody subscribed to marketplace manhood – either because they didn’t want to for whatever reason, or could not. Rugged individualism was a concurrent development with marketplace manhood, and its adherents sought homosocial bonding through means outside the marketplace. Rugged individualism was dependent on the expansion of the frontier, and was a form of escape from the constraints of what by many was considered a feminized society, its development exemplified by the Gold Rush of 1849, where between 1849 and 1850 85,000 men pushed westward to California. These men, 71% of whom were between the ages of 20 and 40, composed 93% of the new state’s population<sup>ix</sup>. They formed what Kimmel calls a “homosocial preserve” – there were few women out west – and those that went west normally did not represent the ‘cult of domesticity back east - and these young men sought the masculinity that for them could only be achieved through the individual autonomy supplied by moving westwards with fellow men. Many of these men regarded the marketplace as feminized, and sought to avoid women and the emasculating influences that came through contact with women. This second form of masculinity can be thought of as escape from the confines of mainstream masculinity, but also as complementary – where mainstream, work-based masculinity is found, so too will the idea of masculine escape and freedom, due to what will be described later on as inherently feminizing qualities of the marketplace.

Central to both of these ideas – marketplace manhood and rugged individualism – is separation from women, and controlling the feminine influences on masculinity. Also central is control: the need to avoid being controlled, which it was assumed women would attempt to do.

Marketplace manhood is inherently dependent on the success of the economy. In order to provide for one's family, and to succeed and gain material success, the economy needs provide jobs with wages high enough to provide the means for men to reassure themselves that they have achieved masculinity. This means that 1) in periods of economic decline, or economic reorganization, the ideal of marketplace manhood becomes more difficult to achieve, and 2) that marketplace manhood is easier to achieve for those who are in a better position to take advantage of economic opportunities. In America, this means middle-class white men. Because white men have traditionally controlled the means of production in America, and have had the ability to discriminate, black men – as well as black and white women - have had more impediments to finding gainful employment. This means that achieving manhood through the marketplace has always been more available to white men, and therefore black men have been forced to escape the marketplace to find fulfilling masculinity.

Certain segments of the American black population also had the opportunity to achieve marketplace manhood – or at least some form of it. The black bourgeoisie had enough participation and success in the market to see marketplace manhood as attainable. However, because of racial discrimination in the job market, it never was entirely so. However, for those black men outside the middle-class who were almost entirely isolated from the job due to racial discrimination, mainstream marketplace manhood was never a consideration; rather, they constructed their own definition of masculinity more in line with rugged individualism and autonomous living in a homosocial setting.

Even those men who are in a position to enjoy the fruits of a role in the competitive economy have not been entirely content with manhood derived from this role. Because of the evolution of corporatism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, (as will be shown in later chapters) working in the labor market could still produce fears of feminization and not attaining masculinity. Also, because of the nature of masculinity as inherently uncertain and requiring constant approval and reassurance, manhood is never complete. Complementary sources are needed to symbolically connect the workingman with the idea of rugged individualism and autonomy. This is manifested in consumption of masculine symbols through media, and participation in practices symbolically associated with the rugged individualist lifestyle.

For the white middle-class, Gangsta rap fulfills the role of providing escape from marketplace manhood and giving the consumer a symbolic association with the frontier and the manliness that comes with it. Its particular place in historical context shows how this came into being. In times of crisis, when traditional marketplace manhood is increasingly unattainable, more and more white men reach out to black cultural tradition to bolster their conception of manliness. The 1980s, when Gangsta rap emerged, was such a period, making the number of whites who delved into the symbolism of Gangsta even greater.

### **Periods of Structural Shifts and their Cultural Responses**

Gangsta emerged in the 1990s on the tail end of decades of cultural and economic change. The latter half the 20<sup>th</sup> had been turbulent, with social movements challenging white supremacy, male superiority, and notions of American political and cultural hegemony. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Vietnam War and resistance to it challenged America's perception of itself and its place in the world. The women's liberation movement challenged men's sense of self and pushed for equal rights for women and greater participation in the economy. The Civil Rights movement had brought racial integration and America's racial

tension into the forefront of American consciousness, and forced Americans to consider its own complicity in discrimination against millions of black men and women. Finally, economic restructuring changed the nature of the United States economy, with deindustrialization reducing the importance of manufacturing, and the rise of the service economy along with corporate restructuring causing layoffs and wage stagnation. These structural shifts and social movements necessarily made men achieving archetypal masculinity more difficult. The response to this was for men associated with the market to shallowly adopt lifestyle practices that enhanced their homosocial belonging, escaping to a world of freedom from the feminizing constraints at home and at work. Gangsta was therefore an outlet through which men who were unable to attain traditional marketplace manhood created new meanings of identity for themselves.

This was not the first time that structural shifts created conditions that required reassessment of masculinity by men, and attempts to regain a sense of self. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, America experienced similar shifts in social, political, and economic arrangements that caused men to reevaluate their masculinity. In the social sphere, the women's suffrage movement pushed for political rights for women and attempted to dislodge male supremacy in the political sphere. The Great Migration, in which millions of black men and women flowed from the rural south to urban north changed demographics in the cities in which they arrived. Along with continued industrialization, America experienced the beginnings of corporatization, where industries became larger and more bureaucratized. Finally, the closing of the frontier destroyed an outlet through which men could escape marketplace manhood to assert their autonomy. In these new conditions, men struggled to achieve masculinity, and flocked to fraternal orders, focused on the outdoors, and consumed images of pioneers in order to feel connected to the rugged masculinity of those who had already fled west to escape the confines of the marketplace. In this time period, it was not the Gangsta who emerged as an important symbolic figure, but rather the Cowboy, who represented the frontier and all that had been lost in the modern, feminized society.

Structural shifts in America forced men from broad all of male society to reconsider their ideas of marketplace manhood, and then latch on to other ideas that fit more with the resources to construct masculinity. For white men, black middle-class men, and working-class men, this meant different things, based on their relative proximity and ease of access to marketplace manhood. During crises, each of these groups attempted to latch onto rugged individualist ideals, with those individuals already associated with blackness having more success than whites, who were innately distanced from the concept. These segments of the population all used Gangsta rap to achieve rugged individualism.

## Chapter One: Masculinity In The Market

In societies based on social hierarchy, certain social groups benefit more than others from the present institutional situation. These groups are what psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum refers to as 'dominant groups;' "Dominant groups," she writes, "by definition, set the parameters within which the subordinate operates. The dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinate and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used."<sup>xiii</sup> Tatum describes white identity as dominant in America, in terms of its hold on political, economic, and cultural institutions. This results in the ability of white America to create conditions that define cultural parameters for themselves, and then to impose structural power and knowledge upon other groups<sup>xi</sup>.

American capitalism was formed on the back of African slaves in the 1800s; this 'free' labor fueled both the agricultural south and industrial north, and the American economy has forever reflected this fact. Even post emancipation, post-enfranchisement, and even Civil Rights, economic opportunity in the Land of Opportunity has been structured by racial discrimination and privilege, in which the cultural knowledge of white men decided who would be allowed to hold which jobs. Poverty rates among American blacks exceed the natural average, as whites have monopolized high paying, status-conferring jobs.

In this way, the American power structure carved up the cultural arena: white society associated themselves with control of the means of production and the political process, meaning middle-class and high-paying jobs. Whiteness, therefore, made marketplace success possible. Without whiteness, marketplace success is both more difficult to achieve, and more contested once achieved. Whiteness, then, became intimately connected to the marketplace ideal, which held economic success and breadwinning as its primary criteria. Discriminatory practices resulting from the dominant-subordinate relationship meant that others were

excluded from marketplace success, and therefore were forced to either redouble efforts to attain marketplace manhood, or look for other avenues.

This meant different things for different social groupings. For poor white men, it meant that they would continue striving towards marketplace manhood, because it had already been implanted in their minds that this was correct for them, despite barriers put in place by class discrimination. However, legislation such as the post-World War II G.I. Bill allowed huge numbers of whites to enter middle-class society<sup>xii</sup>. For the black bourgeoisie, marketplace manhood was also the ideal masculinity. While the black middle-class was at first a relatively small number among black Americans, it steadily grew throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1990s, the number of black Americans within the middle-class had grown to over 25% of the total black population<sup>xiii</sup>. But the black middle-class had one foot placed in marketplace manhood, and the second in lower-class black individualism, and this tension became a defining feature of the black bourgeoisie, as different generations were forced to define their masculinity in different ways based on their historical context.

Much of the black male population – those outside the middle-class - was continually denied access to gainful employment. It is within this segment of men that the archetype of the Gangsta hails from, and he is part of a long lineage. Young black men throughout history have constructed alternatives to marketplace manhood, relying on the tenets of rugged individualism to create homosocial outside of the marketplace arena. Instead, either through leisure, consumption, or underground economic activity, they escaped the requirements of marketplace masculinity and created a separate understanding of masculine identity.

### **White Middle-Class Men and the American Dream**

The American Dream has always been easier to achieve for white men, especially those brought up in middle-class families. Historically, because whites control the job

market, those labeled white have had the opportunity to be least discriminated against when it came to career advancement. The American Dream is part of marketplace manhood. It is the idea that the white male is entitled to a number of things: 1) a well paying job that he can use to 2) support his family – especially his wife, who relies on his income – and 3) pass onto his children, giving them the opportunity to construct masculinity through mainstream marketplace manhood.

Two archetypes most embody the American dream. The first is the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialist – i.e. Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Leland Stanford – who built business empires in the era of laissez faire capitalism. They embody the ‘piratical entrepreneur’ of Schumpeter – not averse to risk, and willing to put himself on the line in order to reap the fruits of the marketplace. These men are seen as putting marketplace success above everything else in their lives, and the result is the industrialists controlling their environment – and the economy of the nation.

The second archetype is the suburban father during the 1950s who works as a white-collar professional in the newly burgeoning middle-class, whose economic success was built upon discrimination against anyone besides white men. Whites are effectively able to discriminate in a number of ways. The U.S. economy is largely built on connections. George Lipsitz describes this phenomenon in *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness*, showing how both the United States government and white men holding positions of power in the economy have actively discriminated against non-whites, giving white Americans a much better chance at reaching the ideals of marketplace masculinity. White dominance of the economy and of economic success is based on two main factors: 1) discriminatory employment practices that favor white workers and 2) more ability to build wealth through housing policies that favor whites. The post-World War II period shows these themes; it was one of the great boom periods of American history, considered to be the zenith of American prosperity. But even then, it disproportionately benefited whites.

In the 1950s, according to Bruce Tucker and Paul Leinberger, “Per capita income rose 48 percent, median family income rose from \$3,083 to \$5,657, and real wages rose by almost 30 percent.<sup>xiv</sup>” The 50s were an incredible boon to the average American family, where new homes were built with all the most recent appliances: “Ninety-eight percent of them had a refrigerator; 90 percent, a television; 18 percent, a clothes dryer; and 13 percent, an air conditioners. Eighty percent of American families owned at least one automobile, and in suburbia 20 percent owned two or more.<sup>xv</sup>” For those Americans in a position to take advantage of the economic boom, this era offered an idealized notion of the American dream, where wages were sufficient to maintain one’s house, wife, children, and confer respect onto the head of the household.

The majority of the benefits fell to suburbanites; and suburbanites were almost entirely white, as black Americans were excluded by discriminatory housing policies. Even the salaries mentioned before were disproportionate: “Suburban dwellers...enjoyed an astonishing income of \$6,500, as against \$3,800 for everyone else.<sup>xvi</sup>” Suburban whites enjoyed the booming economy, and kept out everyone else. Whites attempted to hold onto the highest wage positions for themselves. The entire century reflects this trend, even up into the 1990s, Robin D.G. Kelley writes, where in 1996 “blacks hold less than 4 percent of the 260,000 jobs in magazine and newspaper journalism, where only thirty-seven of the twenty thousand partners in major accounting firms are black, where black attorneys make up less than 2 percent of the lawyers employed by the two hundred fifty largest law firms and less than 1 percent of the partners in these businesses.<sup>xvii</sup>” The mechanisms through which these differences were maintained have to do with the ways in which jobs are distributed to connections (“In the U.S. economy... 86 percent of available jobs do not appear in classified ads and...personal connections prove the most important factor in securing employment...<sup>xviii</sup>), meaning that those individuals already connected to those in power – to other whites – are in a better position to gain high-paying employment. Discrimination in education also leads to less black students enrolling in degree-granting programs that would qualify them for

white-collar professions. With these impediments put in the way, it's no wonder that for all of American history it's whites that have benefited from institutional economic arrangements.

Wages and salary are not the only tools used to build wealth. Investment through housing has historically been one of the main methods through which the middle-class has built wealth, hence the fetishization of housing in American culture. The 1950s enabled many white Americans to own new houses for the first time. "By 1960," Leinberger and Tucker write, "there were 10 million more home owners than there had been in 1950, and increase of 50 percent. More Americans owned their homes than rented them.<sup>xix</sup>" However, the phenomenon of the 1950s and 60s was not merely that many new homeowners were created; others lost out. The post-World War II housing boom created millions of new white homeowners, and left millions of black Americans homeless. Policies of urban renewal and discriminatory housing practices on the part of lenders meant that white fathers had an easier time securing middle-class status for themselves and their children.

Lipsitz details the detrimental effects of urban renewal on poor urban families, and the beneficial effects post-war governmental housing policies had for whites:

"During the 1950s and 1960s, federally assisted urban renewal projects destroyed 20 percent of the central-city housing units occupied by blacks, as opposed to only 10 percent of those inhabited by whites. More than 60 percent of those displaced by urban renewal were African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, or members of other minority racial groups. The federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration financed more than \$120 billion worth of new housing between 1934 and 1962, but less than 2 percent of this real estate was available to nonwhite families - and most of that small amount was located in segregated areas.<sup>xxi</sup>

The effects of these policies reverberated for decades, as continued discriminatory housing practices meant that prices increased over time for whites in segregated neighborhoods, but decreased for blacks. "By 1993," Lipsitz writes, "86 percent of suburban whites still lived in places with a black population below 1 percent.<sup>xxii</sup>" In addition, discriminatory lending

practices continued, with “black and Latino mortgage applicants...60 percent more likely to be turned down for loans than whites, <sup>xxii</sup>” meaning that for vast stretches of American history, whites have been enabled to increase the value of their houses and private assets, while blacks have been prevented from doing so.

The possessive investment in whiteness, therefore, is not just governmental and financial institutions’ bias to white success and material wellbeing: it is also an investment in whites achieving marketplace manhood, closely aligned with historical conceptions of the American Dream. The system is rigged then, to only allow for a select group of men to be admitted into the spatial position where they have the possibility of achieving marketplace manhood. White men in the 1950s are the archetypal marketplace men: they had successful careers, relatively high wages, new housing, and control over their families and wives. Their success however, could only occur based on the pushing out of others and relegating them to less well paying jobs and less stable financial situations. Because of the competitive nature of the market, marketplace manhood is relative, meaning that in order to reassure yourself that you are in fact masculine, you need to be able to see that someone else is doing worse than you. That superiority in terms of marketplace success could only come from exclusion and discrimination. This however, did not mean that those who were excluded did not try to achieve the heights of marketplace manhood. The black bourgeoisie was constantly growing, making its way into the competitive economy, and struggled with its own conception of self and where it fit into American life.

### **Balancing Acts of the Black Middle-Class**

From its earliest iteration – a few well to do Freedmen living in northern cities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the black middle-class class has been caught between two worlds. Always marked by white society as black, the black bourgeoisie has at times gravitated towards

assimilationist ideals, and at times moved towards working-class black ideals. They are therefore captive between white marketplace manhood and black forms of rugged individualism. Their relative affluence and success in the marketplace leads them to desire the security of marketplace masculinity and the material rewards it represents, but they are never fully accepted, as their racial status precludes full assimilation. Because of this, they can never wholeheartedly embrace white society, and must maintain a part of larger black society, or at least maintain connection to it.

While it was only after passage of the Civil Rights of 1964 that the black middle-class began making relatively rapid gains in education and white-collar jobs, the black middle-class's role in black society stretches back all the way to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>xxiii</sup>. During this period, in northern cities such as New York and Chicago, the black middle-class joined fraternal organizations including the Masonic Orders. According to Martin Summers,

“Along with churches, benevolent associations, and political clubs, Masonic Orders played a significant role in the political and reform activities of free black communities in the antebellum period and continued to form the spine of the institutional life of post-emancipation communities until at least the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>xxiv</sup>”

The activity of the black bourgeoisie in these Orders, and their goals, are revealing of their particular conception of masculinity, which to a large extent carried over for the rest of the century. The ideals of these organizations reflected marketplace manhood, and subscribed “to bourgeois ideals of manliness that rested upon production – or an active engagement in the marketplace and an adherence to the producer values of industry, thrift, regularity, and sobriety – and respectability.<sup>xxv</sup>” Adherents also “positioned themselves as providers for, and protectors of black women and children.<sup>xxvi</sup>” These are the values that we find reflected in white ideals of marketplace masculinity, and are connected to the idea of ‘respectability.’

“*Respectability*, as a sociohistorical concept,” Summers writes, “has structured the ways in which upper – and middle-class men and women have interacted with each other. Respectability has encompassed the values with which the bourgeoisie has distinguished

itself from the working-class and...the traditional aristocracy.<sup>xxvii</sup> Associated with black conservative thought, respectability meant proper deportment, “funneled into an aspirational norm of middle-class morality, one centered on promoting a healthy and economically productive lifestyle.<sup>xxviii</sup>” In effect, respectability falls in line with common notions of marketplace masculinity, in that achieving success in the marketplace is the ultimate goal. The only problem was, those who practiced respectability understood that it was an uphill battle. White society was already considered ‘respectable,’ and it was the goal of the black middle-class to represent itself as deserving of marketplace success through of its adoption of white attitudes and cultural values. Even for those of the black middle-class who were most successful, “genuine white peer acceptance still preoccupies – and often escapes – them,” Cornel West writes, and “In this regard, they are still affected by white racism.<sup>xxix</sup>”

At its core, respectability represents an attempt to prove something to broader society: to prove that the black middle-class is enterprising, and shares the marketplace-oriented values of the white middle-class. Because of the burden of representation placed on these men and women, deviant behavior could be tolerated because of its exponentially greater potentiality for poisoning the image of and chances of success for the rest of black society. Influences coming from the black working class especially, were not tolerated. “Jazz,” Bracey writes in *Saviors or Sellouts*:

“was objectionable to black conservatives not simply because it ran afoul of traditional musical structure and convention, but because it derogated from conservative norms of morality, civility, and human decency. Validation of jazz necessarily entailed acknowledgment of inspirations of jazz, inspirations that many conservatives viewed as “inauthentic” and improper representations of black life and, perhaps more pointedly, a serious threat to the project of black racial empowerment.<sup>xxx</sup>”

Like Jazz, Gangsta rap was despised by the black bourgeoisie because of its possibility for creating impediments to racial empowerment. The Gangsta defied respectability. For Civil Right’s era blacks, Gangsta rap was a betrayal of the image-creation process central especially to black middle-class conceptions of racial uplift. Gangsta not only refused to

refute the essentialist claims of racists (that African Americans are violent and misogynistic), but its content had the potential to reinforce them, especially with so many whites already eager to dehumanizing and essentializing blacks.

Many members of the Civil Rights generation, especially those of the middle-class, felt that Gangsta was responsible for diminishing the gains they had made in the previous decades. In the early 1990s, Los Angeles attorney Eric Taylor said that just as those of the Civil Rights generation had begun to see the fruits of their long struggle come to fruition, “another movement was emerging within the same community that quickly began tearing away at epic civil rights advancements. It labeled many blacks who had endured systemic obstacles to take part in the American Dream as ‘sell-outs.’ Ironically this movement has found a voice, and to some, legitimacy in gangsta rap music. <sup>xxxii</sup>”

For the black middle-class then, the process of achieving marketplace masculinity does not merely entail thrift, production and economy. That was enough for white society, but for blacks attempting to fulfill marketplace manhood, image maintenance was also crucial. One’s hard work was inherently less productive, because racial discrimination meant that wages were lower and it was difficult to build private wealth. Respectability was a method of attempting to break down these walls through appealing to white cultural superiority. This meant that in some ways, the black-middle class was forced to differentiate itself from the rest of black society, often resulting in disparagement from those they sought to distance themselves from - the black working-class and working-poor. These social groupings held some of the most limited economic opportunity in American society, and this economic discrimination shaped their conception of masculinity and behavior to attain it.

### **Escape to the Underground**

Some segments of American society decided that marketplace manhood wasn’t for them; or, it was decided for them. Either way, there are many examples of those individuals

who have sought happiness and fulfillment outside the confines of the mainstream market. Adherents of communalism, such as the Shakers, transcendentalists, and hippies, all rejected the market-oriented nature of mainstream American masculinity. Some politically leftist groups such as Students for A Democratic Society, the Black Panthers, and the Communist Party rejected economic competition, seeking to create a society not based on the hierarchical ordering comprising the status quo. The reasons these groups held for abandoning mainstream masculinity and society in general are different for each one. Some were disenfranchised from taking place in mainstream society and so sought other pathways to a gratifying life, while others had opportunity to engage in competition and chose not to for ideological reasons.

For those black Americans on the lower-rungs of the racist class hierarchy, mainstream economic success was often a far-off idea. Hiring practices based in discrimination often relegated poor black men to menial jobs that did not offer good prospects for career advancement. In addition, even when legislation aimed at curbing discriminatory hiring practices did help black men gain good manufacturing jobs as in the 1960s, they were the first ones laid off. “Because the 1964 Civil Rights Act came so late,” Lipsitz writes, “minority workers who received jobs because of it found themselves more vulnerable to seniority-based layoffs when business automated or transferred operations overseas.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The statistics were sometimes startling: “In cases where minority workers made up only 10 to 12 percent of the work force in their area in 1974, they accounted for 60 to 70 percent of those laid off.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> And those young men who were able to get industrial jobs in the first place were the lucky ones. Many others only had choices within the very lowest level of the service sector. This led to high rates of poverty among black Americans throughout American history, and continued even into the 1990s; in 1993, with 20% of all children living in poverty, 50% of all black children were in poverty<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

Additionally, entering the workplace, which was dominated by white norms and

values could be difficult for those not accustomed to those standards. In his study of crack dealers in Spanish Harlem in the 1980s, Philippe Bourgeois points out that the American workplace is embedded with white cultural mores, and white managers expect all of those who inhabit it to conform to these standards, or be out of a job. This may seem common sense, and from the standpoint of efficiency, it is. But still, it has the potential of creating difficulties for those who did not grow up in an environment where those norms were standard. The crack dealers Bourgeois spent time with had all attempted to enter the legitimate job market at one point (or two or three), but had found the low-wage jobs in the service sector to be both unfulfilling and difficult to adapt to<sup>xxxv</sup>. In previous work as janitors, mail clerks, and busboys, many crack dealers felt humiliated by their powerlessness and inability to capitulate correctly to white norms they did not understand. Therefore, achieving marketplace manhood through traditional means was impossible in practice. An alternative had to be found in order to create a sense of self.

However, even groups that sought to escape mainstream marketplace manhood were not able to entirely transcend American masculinity. Because there are limited variations of ideology that can be appropriated from, resistance-based cultural ideas stem from ideologies that are seen as counter-mainstream. The other half of American manhood, outside of the marketplace variety, is rugged masculinity, or that which is associated with the frontier. In the American mind, the frontier represented the antithesis of the market; the market was civilized society, the frontier was wilderness. In civilized society, one had responsibilities to one's family, to the business venture, to the government. On the frontier, a man only had responsibility to his self, and could be truly free on the range. Cowboys, pioneers, and gold-rushers all became separated from women and became severed from dependency. They lived lives autonomous from the cult of domesticity. Embodying this form of masculinity was a resistant act that created new standards of identity that were inherently nonconformist. However, because these young men still lived in a capitalist climate, marketplace manhood

could not be entirely abandoned. Rather, they reworked marketplace manhood to suit their situation, through a rugged individualist framework.

Called the 'baad' mentality, or 'street masculinity,' this form of masculinity employed by many young black men was an attempt at creating economic opportunities that were at the same time conforming and resistant to marketplace manhood. "Although," Newton writes, "...street masculinity implied a rejection of traditional self-making masculine ideals, it also incorporated elements of the tough, individualistic, and economically oriented values associated with them.<sup>xxxvi</sup>" The baad mentality in many ways was concerned with economic self-making. However, instead of working in a corporate bureaucratic office, the economic activities of those with the baad mentality used rugged individualist thinking to keep themselves separate from the feminizing influences of corporate control. They were their own boss. They were entrepreneurs who didn't suffer from the feminization of always being directed by the invisible forces of corporatism. They did not have dependents at home they were forced to support, and therefore could view themselves as more autonomous than their middle-class counterparts.

Robin D.G. Kelly presents an example of this mentality in his description of the early life of Malcolm X, when he was still Malcolm Little. During the 1940s, Malcolm moved to Boston to be with family, and to look for work. Unfortunately, as Kelly writes, "in most Northeastern cities during the war, African Americans were still faced with job discrimination, and employment opportunities for blacks tended to be low-wage, menial positions.<sup>xxxvii</sup>" Malcolm worked at one point as a shoe-shiner, but was put-off by the mask he was forced to wear in order to fulfill white clients' conceptions of the 'Happy Negro.' 'Legitimate' work was understandably unpalatable to someone who was forced to become a stereotype in order to continue in (somewhat) gainful employment. Malcolm eventually became involved in the illicit economy for reasons similar to those of the crack dealers of the 1980s: pimping and selling drugs was a means of gaining money without having to betray

one's identity and pride.

Just as the manner in which the money was gained was resistant to the normalized 'respectable' version of marketplace manhood, money gained in the illicit economy was not to be saved according to white, middle-class culture, either. Instead, it was used to create more forms of resistant in behavior, specifically, creating homosocial bonds with other young black men. Kelley writes:

“...most of the hustlers with whom Malcolm associated believed in an anti-work, anti-accumulation ethic. Possessing “capital” was not the ultimate goal; rather, money was primarily a means by which hustlers could avoid wage work and negotiate status through the purchase of prestigious commodities. <sup>xxxviii</sup>”

Long-term accumulation was not the point of hustling, meaning neither was entering the middle-class through thrift and economy. What was the point then? As Kelly shows, employing capitalist strategies to gain currency was not valuable in and of itself; there was a deeper reason.

To those individuals who follow the cultural strictures of the American middle-class, leisure time is when you are able to relax and enjoy the fruits of your labor. The middle-class home is a preserve when men can interact with the subjects under their control, i.e. their wife and children. The home then provides a reassurance of marketplace manhood identity, when the middle-class man sees that through his adherence to the middle-class notions of masculinity he has found an end result where he is in control of others.

Malcolm Little and the hustlers like him are not part of this goal; they have been isolated, pushed from this idea of manly family life, and need to seek another way of feeling like men. Instead of controlling women and children in the home, the goal is to make quick money so that one may enjoy leisure time in which one does not have to deface themselves with inhabiting the white world. During his leisure time, Malcolm and other members of the black working-class and working-poor went to clubs or other such 'disreputable' places to be with other black men and interact with women in a capacity that was not representative of

the supportive nature of the cult of domesticity. Kelley writes,

“Despite opposition from black religious leaders and segments of the petite bourgeoisie, black working people took the opportunity to do what they wished with their own bodies. The sight of hundreds moving in unison on a hardwood dance floor unmistakably reinforced a sense of collectivity as well as individuality...<sup>xxxix</sup>”

Leisure time was a time one could reinforce identity through homosocial bonds. Not just racial identity, but also class, as shown by how the black bourgeoisie shied away from such activities on the basis of their being disreputable, and not suitable for one seeking to achieve respectability.

This form of identity has a long history in black American folklore and thought. In *Nuthin but a “g” thang*, Eithne Quinn shows how the 1990s idea of a Gangsta is connected to the toast ballads of Stackolee, representative of the ‘badman’ archetype, and of the hustler pimp narratives, represented by figures such as Iceberg Slim<sup>xl</sup>. These characters live outside of ‘civilized’ society, are prone to violence, view women as objects and passing amusements, and are autonomous and free. They are not controlled by anyone, and resist control. These oral ballads, or toasts, go all the way to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and represent the ideal in black life of an individual that does no scrape to the whims of white society, but rather is able to display rugged individualist traits that allow them to control their own lives. The pimp is valued for his ability to make a living without having to rely on whites. He further is able to control women, providing a substitute for the middle-class ideal of controlling women through marketplace manhood. The pimp displays a resistant form of marketplace manhood, and controls women through his daily work rather than in a supportive familial capacity.

As we will see in the following chapter, the baad version of masculinity responds to insecurities already present in middle-class marketplace manhood; specifically, the feminizing nature of corporatization, and feminization that comes from being near women, and being responsible for them. Black men constructed an identity that left many middle-class men

jealous, for they saw in these poor black men the autonomy that they craved but would never be able to have. It is this jealousy and admiration that resulted in the prevalence of the Gangsta archetype in the 1990s.

## Chapter Two: The Uncertain Burden of Man

Any identity that is based on control is inherently volatile. Control is a relative feeling that can never be reached – or if it can, then only by those on top of the system, who truly control it. In a hierarchical order, even those middle-class men who are relatively privileged do not control their own fate or destiny, and must recognize at some point that this is the case. While this does not mean that they will necessarily give up their ideals and sense of masculinity, it does mean that marketplace manhood will not be enough, and the ensuing leak of confidence must be plugged with something else. This is part of the story of how rugged individualism evolved in the first place. For those who were not a part of marketplace manhood, another version of manhood needed to exist. Men still had to be men, because to be a man meant to be superior, and in a hierarchically ordered society, to be superior is desirable.

Rugged individualism then exists as a method for marketplace manhood-oriented men to fall back on as a secondary source of masculinity. As stated before, rugged individualism is the antithesis of marketplace manhood. It is dangerous as opposed to safe. Wild as opposed to civilized. These are also characteristics that have traditionally been attributed to black men, constituting the idea of their ‘deviance’ from white middle-class norms. There is a long history of white men consciously adopting the traits of black male culture in order to gain a fulfilling sense of identity. Usually this involves adopting masculine traits that these white men have either been denied through some mechanism, or that they have not been able to rationalize to themselves. This is the consuming of the exotic other often written about in scholarly research. Gangsta rap falls in line with this type of search for masculinity that fills in the gaps for those who are disenchanted with the flaws inherent in middle-class marketplace manhood.

### **The Instability of Middle-Class Masculinity**

American masculinity is predicated on the idea of control, and control is relative. One can only be in control when one believes one is in control, and belief in control is predicated on certain ideas of how control is performed. In America, control is part of individual autonomy, meaning the individual does not want to feel as if they are a part of anything that has influence over them. They require the illusion of total free will because to feel that any decision is not the sole purview of the individual is to admit that there are forces outside of oneself that create the individual's path, and therefore take control away. This applies to all structural forces, including economic, political, and even culture. Susan Faludi writes in *Stiffed*, "Culture...is the whole environment we live in; to acknowledge its sway is to admit that men never had the power they imagined. To say that men are embedded in the culture is to say, by the current standards of masculinity, that they are not men."<sup>xli</sup>

Men need to see themselves in control, and therefore, require constant reassurance that this is the present state of events. They seek to order their lives so as to provide that reassurance. Standards of control also depend on the ability of the individual to win. The American capitalist system, based on competition with other individuals, and a survival of the fittest mentality, is an arena which both provides a hierarchy in which men can measure themselves against others, and which can never be entirely fulfilling. Men in the marketplace, Kimmel writes, "usually tried to "stack the decks in their favor" by defining themselves as superior to women and to other men – men of color and working-class males – and by struggling to exclude these "others" from economic and social power."<sup>xlii</sup> Those in a position to do so would necessarily seek to keep themselves on top by any means available. However, they were never entirely safe against the nagging sense of loss of control. Because total control does not exist, and because positions of supreme power are relegated to only a select

few, even the privileged are not in control of their own lives. Periodically they are given a glimpse of their relative powerlessness, and it disturbs them.

For the white middle-class male living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this generally occurs for one of two reasons, 1) the corporate-bureaucratic nature of white-collar employment, and 2) structural shifts that change the relative place of men in society, making it more difficult for them to maintain their conception of control. Crises exacerbate the already existing insecurities inherent in middle-class life, and therefore act as a complementary factor. Both the beginning and end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were such periods. The structural economic shifts during these periods made fulfilling work harder to come by, and the inroads of women, blacks, immigrants, and other marginalized groups into the public sphere meant that white men either had to relinquish some control or fight the gains made by these groups. White middle-class men created cultural responses in order to salvage a sense of security they felt was under attack, via either attacking the groups, or escaping into rugged masculinity through consumption or shifts in lifestyle habits.

### **Feminizing Bureaucracies**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century economy was very different from that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the era of Schumpeter's 'piratical entrepreneur,' when capitalism had not yet crystallized into the towering corporate entities that came to exist a century later. "Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism," according to Kimmel, "required adventurous producers, men willing to take risks in the marketplace. Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial capitalism, by contrast, required adventurous consumers and cautious, timid, and obedient workers.<sup>xliii</sup>" The business practices of most Americans was more self-actualizing in that period. "Before the Civil War," Kimmel writes, "88 percent of American men were farmers or self-employed businessmen.<sup>xliv</sup>" This fit more with the Jeffersonian ideal of Republican autonomy, and gave the

individual a sense of power in their workplace. The institution of slavery also meant that the economic activity of slaveholders was based on possession and control. However, as corporate structures became more and more common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, those in the middle-class used their labor to produce for others. Increasing industrialization meant that those involved in manufacturing and factory work directly worked in order to create profit for other men in control of the companies. While this benefited the Captains of Industry, it meant that an element of control had been taken from workers.

This also applied to the new white-collar bourgeoisie, and the situation was only exacerbated over time. Faludi writes:

“The massive bureaucracies of postwar [World War II] “white collar” employment, especially the defense contractors fat on government largesse, were replete with make-work jobs with inflated titles. Their vast middle managements were filled with functionaries who often didn’t even know what they were managing, who suspected they weren’t really needed at all. What these corporations were offering was a secure job, not a vital role. And ultimately even that would prove a lie. <sup>xlv</sup>”

In this environment, work became not a place of control, but rather a reassurance of the loss of it. They sought fulfillment of the marketplace manhood ideal through other arenas, meaning using their success as a means of creating control in the domestic realm. Through work they could purchase things, or create a lifestyle in which they could feel as if they had something others did not. This is the ‘iron cage’ Weber described in the *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*. Work no longer became fulfilling in itself as it had been during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Instead, work merely became a method to get a paycheck to spend on commodities and people that brought fulfillment <sup>xlvi</sup>. During times of unemployment Faludi writes,

“At the outplace center...the planners, engineers, the managers – rarely spoke of their lost work. They talked to me of their lost paychecks, their lost cars, the lost square footage of the split-level ranches they once owned, but not of what they had contributed to the company’s fortunes.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

Those in white-collar occupations were not satisfied with their jobs because those jobs could not confer the assurance of autonomy and purpose required by workers. Instead, the emphasis shifted to controlling the home and other areas of private life. However, even having control over the home was not entirely satisfying.

Having control over women and the children in the home is one response of middle-class white men to the feeling of feminization in the workplace. Having dependents is a reflection of success. Not having one’s wife work means confers reassurance of a degree of success. But it also means that one is not entirely autonomous, and that one has responsibilities. The reassurance of providing is then not actually experienced at the home, but experienced at work. You are working towards a goal of sustaining the family unit. It gives purpose and meaning to an otherwise emasculating work situation. But at home, the man is reminded again and again that he has a family dependent on him, and that he is not autonomous. His life is not entirely his, but is shared. He cannot come and go as he pleases. He is not the rugged frontiersman, and he does not have the freedom he believes is also a required part of his identity. He feels it is suppressed, taken away by his wife and children, and feels feminized by their presence. However, in a crisis, he is not even given these things he feels are his due, not matter how unsatisfying they may be.

### **Crises of Masculinity**

Each kind of crisis has a different effect on marketplace manhood. Economic restructuring creates problems at work, meaning that success becomes more difficult in a realm that already has feminizing influences. When a job is lost, or salary decreases, being

able act as a provider, and having control over ones family is gone. Shifts in racial demographics, increased competition from women, black Americans and immigrants makes economic success even more difficult, compounding the problem that economic recessions create. In addition, when women enter the workforce, they take their dependency on men with them, meaning the man no longer has anyone to provide for. He cannot feel as though he is the breadwinner; that he is in control of that sector of life. Therefore, women's rights movements are doubly threatening to men, who have strongly resisted them, as they attack the last bastion of traditional male superiority.

The economic restructuring of the 1980s was devastating to the identities of many middle-class American men. It followed the post-World War II boom, one of the largest in American history, making the contrast even starker. The workforce had increased due to the baby boom, meaning competition was even greater. American men expected the prosperity to continue, so when the real wages of American workers declined nearly 20% between 1973 and 1994, it had a devastating effect<sup>xlvi</sup>. The economic decline affected all strata of workers. Lipsitz writes, "Only 6 percent of full-time workers between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four received the poverty level wages in 1979, but 15 percent did so in 1990."<sup>xlix</sup> Workers saw that they were worse off than their parents: the "average man under thirty was earning 25 to 30 percent less than his counterpart in the early '70s," and "the average young man with only a high-school education...was making only \$18,000, half the earnings of his counterpart a decade earlier."<sup>l</sup> This was the era when society became more stratified in terms of wealth. By 1989, 1% of the American population owned 86% of all wealth<sup>li</sup>. This exacerbated the problem of control; when such a small percentage of the population holds such a large percentage of total wealth, everyone else has less chance of feeling in control of their economic situation. Middle-class men, relatively better off, still paled in comparison to those who were truly in control of the economy, and stagnating wages meant that less money was available to be spent on the home.

Outside of layoffs and stagnating wages, other arenas in which men had sought refuge were being removed from their grasp. Home ownership fell for the first time since World War II, “from a postwar peak of almost 66 percent of the population in 1980, when it began falling, to less than 64 percent in 1988. <sup>liii</sup>” It also fell the most in younger age groups. “In 1973, 23.4 percent of people under age 25 owned homes; in 1988 the rate was 15.5 percent. For 25-29 year olds the rate fell from 43.6 percent in 1973 to just over 36 percent in 1988. <sup>liiii</sup>” Declining home ownership meant declining ability to provide for a family, and to have women dependent on oneself.

Of course, it was not white middle-class men who were most affected by the effects of deindustrialization. It was those on the bottom rung of the economic ladder, the working-class and working-poor, who suffered the brunt on the effects. “Between 1965 and 1990,” Lipsitz writes, “Black family income fell by 50 percent, and Black youth unemployment quadrupled. The share of low-income households headed by Blacks increased by one-third. <sup>liv</sup>” But still, it was felt by all segments of society, to varying degrees, and those who were relatively privileged still felt the relative effects.

The effects of the women’s liberation movement exacerbated the effects of the economic downturn. The 1970s oversaw a period of great advancement for those women privileged enough to take advantage of new opportunities in education and the workplace. Record numbers of anti-discrimination policies benefiting women gave women access to “elite” professions <sup>lv</sup>. Women’s total representation in the workforce increased greatly, as did median earnings. In addition the advances of women in the workplace, Roe Vs. Wade and other women-focused legislation passed through Congress, giving huge visibility to the movement.

But as women moved out of full-time housework and into paid positions in the workforce, they not only displaced some men, but also took away the image men held of providing for those that could not provide for themselves. Career advancement and

workforce participation were seen as masculine traits part of marketplace manhood, so when women began embodying these traits, they became no longer specific to men. The monopoly had been ended, and the situation became more ambiguous. If women were embodying characteristics of marketplace masculinity to any extent – and in many cases, more successfully than some men – then men felt threatened.

The cumulative effects of the changing nature of American life during the 1970s and 80s can be seen in the increasing suicide rate. As the New York Times reported in 1987, “A total of 49,496 Americans from 15 to 24 committed suicide in the 1970s. The suicide rate for young men rose from 13.5 to 20.2 per 100,000, while the rate for young women rose from 4.2 to 4.3 per 100,000.<sup>lvi</sup>” The rate decreased slightly during the 1980s, to around 12.5 in 1984, and remained relatively stable for the rest of the decade<sup>lvii</sup>. The rate was higher for men than for women. Overall, the suicide rate had tripled among Americans between ages 15 to 19 since the 1950s, peaking in 1977 at 13.3 deaths per 100,000<sup>lviii</sup>. Cultures are, Cornel West writes, “in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide,<sup>lix</sup>” which means that the cultural understanding of young people (especially men) in the 1970s and 80s had not been deep enough to prevent them from feeling alienated from society. In fact, the male identity was not able to align quickly enough to the new structural foundations of society, and alienation ensued.

The very identity of men was at stake, then, and had and so they sought methods to reify their identity as men, looking outside traditional grounds. They could respond either 1) via what Faludi calls ‘backlash,’ or attacking the gains made by women, trying to force them back to their original position, 2) try to change masculinity in a way that didn’t stress competition, or 3) escape marketplace manhood and seek masculinity in different sectors.

## Chapter Three: Looking Past White

Many men were a part of what Susan Faludi calls backlash, or the aggressive pushback against the gains made by women. This is the phenomenon of the ‘angry white male’ attempting to hold back the gains made by women. The backlash was not just in popular media, but also in government policies: “one-third of the Reagan budget cuts...came out of programs that predominantly serve women – even more extraordinary when one considers that all these budget programs combined represent only 10 percent of the federal budget” and violence against women; “Reported rapes more than doubled from the early ‘70s [until 1991] – at nearly twice the rate of all other violent crimes and four times the overall crime rate in the United States. <sup>ix</sup>”

But many men, because of their upbringing or particular historical circumstances, were not able to be a part of that. They maybe held views on women that were not misogynistic, or they were not radical by nature, or for whatever reason. Because they were not able to secure their identity through anger towards women – or towards minority groups - many white men were forced to look outside of the traditional notions of masculine normalcy for a secure – or at least *more* secure – identity. However, this entailed a number of problems, the first of them being the all-encompassing nature of whiteness for the white middle-class person. White normativity presented problems for those seeking to escape to an alternative identity, and first had to be escaped from. In the end, no white man ever truly could leave white normativity. Rather, white normativity structured the white male attempt at escape.

The second challenge was finding an identity that was fulfilling for the individual. Because each human is born into a specific life-circumstance, meaning a certain set of parents with certain values and ideology; friends with certain identities; a certain geographic

area with its own unique set of problems and historical circumstances etc, there is some variation – no matter how slim – between each individual in a social grouping which decides what they are more prone to accepting, or for what they will find a fulfilling identity.

Choosing an identity then is the challenge that identity-displaced individuals must cope with. This is not an easy thing to do. When you attempt to escape the confines of what you have been told is your correct sense of self and purpose, it is difficult to come to terms with a new set of values and sense of place within the world. It is not uncommon for some individuals to cycle through multiple identities, and to never be entirely satisfied.

There are three common ways that American men have commonly ‘found’ themselves, especially in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; pathways that provide means for individuals to proceed with the escape from marketplace manhood. These methods are especially pertinent for the 1980s, and are 1) the concept of ‘expressive individualism,’ or the belief in the individual having an essential nature that comes into being through the mere act of choice, 2) adhering to an anti-capitalist political ideology, and 3) symbolically attaching oneself to a social grouping that is not associated with white middle-class marketplace manhood – traditionally, working-class black male society. The third pathway is more relevant than the first in exploring the roots of the popularity of Gangsta rap, but all three are required to understand the milieu of the 1980s and 90s.

These three methods are different, and are available to different subsections of American men due to the nature of their mechanisms. Symbolically attaching oneself to working-black society (not needed for working-class black men themselves) was available to all of white society, and to middle-class black society. However, as we will see later, each group had varying degrees of success with this method. The second method, adhering to an anti-capitalist political ideology, is available to all of male society, though each group will bring a different outlook to it. Expressive individualism is generally available only to white

society, because it is predicated on the notion of a transcendent self that can exist only due to the characteristics of white normativity.

What is important to understand about these methods is that they all revolved around the idea of homosocial preserves, or spaces where men could interact with other men. Just as on the frontier, the pioneers sought homosocial spaces where rugged individualism could occur, so too did these men. Each of these masculine affiliations gave men a space for peer group associations, and allowed them to put emphasis on homosocial space so as to get away from the problems that came with emasculation in the workplace and at home, both of which resulted from contact with and relations with women.

### **Characteristics of White Normativity**

Whiteness has always been juxtaposed against blackness in America, associated with marketplace manhood for men and service domesticity for women. For those dissatisfied with middle-class marketplace manhood, it means that they inevitably have to attempt to remove themselves from the identity that is seemingly correct and fitting. The individual has some realization that they are not what they are supposed to be. They are either less or more, or something else entirely. Human identity cannot maintain a vacuum, and so when an aspect of identity is shoved away, something needs to replace it. But when one is inherently white, and whiteness is strongly symbolically attached to middle-class marketplace manhood, the individual is required to break that symbolic attachment somehow. They are forced to look outside whiteness, because whiteness is marketplace manhood, and find something that is either not white (blackness), that is supposedly transcendent of whiteness (expressive individualism), or that is not connected with capitalist thinking, and therefore also anti-marketplace manhood and anti-white (anti-capitalist ideology). However, it is impossible to fully break out of whiteness, and so the attempt is somewhat futile.

The initial difficulty with finding an identity outside whiteness is white normativity. One of the conditions that defines white Americans is racial normalcy, meaning that whites generally do not actively consider or explore their racial identity. This is not to say that being white is not a part of their identity, that it does not confer certain symbols of status and privilege on them, or that it does not affect their conception of self and day to day reality; it does. Normalcy means that the condition of whiteness is an invisible quality to most white Americans, while to any other racial category in America, racial identification plays a much more visible role in identity formation.

Racial categories are inexorably intertwined with the relationship between subordinate and dominant groups, as Tatum describes. During adolescence, she writes, "...all adolescents look at themselves in new ways, but not all adolescents think about themselves in racial terms.<sup>lxi</sup>" It is dominant groups that tend not to think about themselves in racial terms, and subordinate groups that tend to do so. The reason for this is that dominant groups are able to, through various means, portray and create themselves as the norm to which all other societal groupings must orient towards. "Dominant groups," Tatum writes, "by definition, set the parameters within which the subordinate operates. The dominant group holds the power in society relative to the subordinate and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used.<sup>lxii</sup>" The ways through which this cultural condition is accomplished is myriad, and necessarily extend to every corner of the makeup of society. At its most basic level, normalcy is a tacit agreement between members of society that whiteness is the standard to which all must adhere, and is reinforced through dominance by white society over capitalistic means of production, the political process, and general means of discourse, which extends all the way to day-to-day interactions.

What this results in is an invisibility of whiteness. Whiteness does not question itself, because it is not forced to. Normalcy, exacted through domination of social institutions designed by their nature to keep the dominant group unaware of its own subjective nature, means that those who are a part of it can easily become unquestioning. Yancy writes,

“Whiteness fails to call into question its own modes of socioepistemological constructivity, ways that social reality is constituted and regulated,” creating a world that “whiteness then denies having given birth to...<sup>lxiii</sup>” Whites see themselves as natural, the inevitable result of the world order, and the central knowledge of the American individual to which all others are compared, and therefore should aspire to become.

White normativity cannot be overcome by a single individual. If society at large still operates under the mechanisms of white normativity then the enlightenment of a single individual does not mean that they are suddenly outside the bounds of white normativity. All these individuals who either consciously or unconsciously become unglued from the walls of normativity are still within the system, and therefore their actions still are co-opted by white normativity. Both of these groups who attempt to escape marketplace manhood and create a new identity still do so within the larger identity of whiteness. For those who attempt to escape to black culture, their whiteness is even more glaring. For those who are within expressive individualism, they understand their choices to be universal and natural, highlighting the nature of normativity as it creates an individual who delves even deeper into subjective, selfish reasoning. For those who seek an anti-capitalist political ideology, their white status still confers privilege that allows them to gain access to the capitalist system later.

### **Expressive Individualism and Voluntary Association**

The promulgation of subcultural groups in the 1980s and 90s is representative of the individualistic search for self through expressive individualism. The members of each of these groups – goths, punks, metal heads, vegans, hippies – see themselves as destined to be a part of the group they choose. They feel (often briefly, as these groups are largely populated by youth who quickly move on<sup>lxiv</sup>) that these groups are the only home they have, and they

claim this voluntary association as representative of their true self<sup>dxv</sup>.

Expressive individualism is the assumption that the individual has an inherent quality to themselves that is expressive of their true being. If this seems ambiguous, that's because the trait is infinitely malleable. It presumes that each individual is waiting to be found out, through the process of (what is seen as involuntary) association. Because each individual is assumed to have an essential nature, they are able to rationalize their decision to join whichever group their structural situation has led them to. This is the trait that Robert Bellah described in *Habits of the Heart*, writing that it appearing in the 1960s in the behavior of those who joined New Age religious or artistic movements<sup>lxvi</sup>.

For youth growing up in the 1980s and 90s, expressing ones self correctly is the quest that drives behavior, especially for teenagers that are in the prime period of identity search. In this search for identity, Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker write in *The New Individualists*, what is important is the very act of choosing:

“In ways that bewilder their parents, the offspring [of Baby Boomers] can produce elaborate rationales, including ironic ones, for their choice of everything from audio equipment to wines to cuisine to personal computers. Such rationales may be based on virtually anything – value, beauty, utility, or even a self-conscious engagement with the symbolism of particular purchases. But what this most-compulsive rationalizing reveals is not a concern with substance, but a desire to be seen as one who chooses.<sup>lxvii</sup>”

In this ideology where the individual seeks to create him or herself, any choice is a good one. The emergence of many distinct subcultures during this time period is reflective of the search for one's identity, and they all offer choice to the individual. All of these differing groups offer both the ability to differentiate oneself, as well as a means to feeling connected. All these groups are volunteeristic, unlike the black community, where one is placed with one's birth and skin-tone. Middle-class communities of the 1980s and 90s are voluntary peer groups and one can feel one has chosen and therefore has been honest to one's identity while still gaining the solidarity and sociality of a community. They are also predicated on whiteness, because without the normative standing conferred by whiteness, these white

youths would be symbolically attached to a variety of attributes. Instead, they are able to associate with what they choose, because of their assumed transcendent nature.

Leinberger and Tucker argue that the defining cultural characteristic of the baby boomers and their offspring is “honesty.” This quality, they write, “aimed at establishing contact between authentic selves regardless of the social consequences – is paramount, a personal orientation that ideally would reduce social alienation.<sup>lxviii</sup>” This trait is then meant to help the individual find a path. It is the idea of expressing the assumed inner self openly so that others may connect to the alienated individual who has been severed from their initially – or never – imposed identity. This is necessarily more likely for whites as opposed to blacks, as whites live within normativity and therefore are able to feel as if they have a true self that is separated from race. It also follows that during times of crisis, this idea becomes more popular, as traditional ideals are displaced.

### **Anti-Capitalist Masculinity**

For some American men, adopting a leftist political ideology enabled them to create a means of escaping marketplace manhood ideology. This enabled them to feel autonomous in that they were free of the dominant masculine ideology. It was a strategy that necessarily escaped the idea of marketplace manhood because it refuted it, stating that it was un-egalitarian and wrong. Adherents sought to portray themselves as in a struggle between good and evil, as the protectors and benefactors of the poor and weak. Therefore, both black and white men created a masculinity that escaped marketplace manhood through refutation of the legitimacy of the capitalist system, and used rugged individualism to cement their masculinity firmly within American tradition. Two examples of this are the Black Panther Party, the revolutionary black socialist political party active during the 1960s and 70s, and Do-It-Yourself Punks (DIY Punks) who became active in the 1990s.

The Black Panther Party was unique in its attempt to fuse higher-minded political ideals (consciously protesting economic discrimination against blacks and promoting community self-determination) with the bad street mentality of working-class black society.

In *From Panthers to Promise Keepers*, Judith Newton writes,

“In crafting what they saw as a higher masculine ideal, the Black Panthers would attempt to translate elements of the individualistic, “bad” and often criminal, masculinity of the city streets into self-sacrificing militancy on behalf of the black community as a whole.<sup>lxix</sup>”

The image of the Panthers was meant to seem dangerous: in their leather jackets and berets, carrying guns to show their devotion to protecting the black community from threats of police violence, the Panthers mixed masculine rugged individualism with an anti-capitalist political rhetoric, creating a sense of self that was still masculine even though it did not adhere to mainstream marketplace manhood.

However, this mentality, which sought to preserve a semblance of masculinity (it did not abandon masculinity as a whole, merely the marketplace manhood mentality which was emasculating) meant that it was sometimes unwelcoming to women. The rhetoric of armed struggle, Judith Newton writes, “was also traditionally associated with men, and Black Power, like the New Left, often postulated its warrior figures as male.<sup>lxxv</sup>” Men running the organization believed that in order to succeed, power, virility, and manhood were necessary. Women could not be part of this mission, due to the rugged individualistic nature of the male participants, and the status of homosocial bonding as an integral part of the Black Panther identity.

Similarly, DIY Punks of the 1980s and 90s - for the most part, white kids growing up in well to do suburbs - sought to create a homosocial preserve outside the grounds of marketplace manhood. Just like the Black Panthers, the young white men of DIY Punks had an anti-capitalist ideology but still held on to rugged individualist notions that didn't allow for full participation by women, as that would to some extent defeat the attempt to escape from marketplace manhood. In a documentary of DIY Punks from Long Island, *Between*

*Resistance and Community*, the themes that emerge are building community within a consumer culture that alienates the individual. Matt, one of the young men the documentary follows says of the DIY Punk scene, “It’s a rebellion in the sense that we live in a society that tells you [that] you have to make money, you can only be happy if you have money...what we’re doing is the exact opposite of that, that form of community based on love and compassion,<sup>lxxi</sup>” further stating, “What is be rebelled against is...a culture based on competition.” Matt and those like him, specifically reject the self-making tenets of marketplace manhood, opting out and attempting to create, just like the Panther Party, an area in which they can escape to.

But just like other hardcore punk scenes, the DIY movement also largely functions as a homosocial preserve, due to the aggressive nature of the music and dancing, often extremely physical and generally associated with masculinity. Rachel, one of the members of the Long Island scene complains during the film, “I definitely think there’s a boys club atmosphere at shows.<sup>lxxii</sup>” This is a common complaint that Ross Haenfler found in his study of the Straight Edge hardcore movement. There was often a subsection of the population (many of whom had pro-feminist ideals) that had a very masculinist presence, dominating shows and making women uncomfortable. The idea of hardcore as a ‘boys club’ reveals how many men involved in the scene, with ideologically leftist values, still remained attached to rugged individualism (the dangerous, autonomous element) so as to stay attached to masculinity.

### **Reaching Over the Racial Divide**

There are many examples throughout American history of whites entering what is traditionally known as black realms of culture, or appropriating them. The Jazz age, during the 1920s and 30s, was full of white musicians playing music associated with black society; beatniks of the 1950s separated themselves from white society in order to experience a life lived for the moment; and Elvis adopted styles of black music and brought them to white

audiences. These are some of the most prominent examples of white cultural appropriation, but even the mere act of whites attending a Jazz club in the 1920s, to witness a black musician playing Jazz accomplishes similar purposes; or even more simply, purchasing a Jazz or R&B record.

The driving force behind these behavioral patterns is, at its most basic level, an attempt to escape whiteness and fill in the gaps of identity. Reaching out into the realms of non-whiteness has been a common method of distancing oneself from ideological traits no longer relevant to the white individuals – specifically, middle-class marketplace manhood notions of masculinity. The reason for this is related to the binary nature of American racial categorization, which creates both an ease with which black identity is initially explored, and a difficulty in creating deep forms of exploration. The ease with which this is accomplished is caused by two main reasons: 1) the racial binary inherent in American culture and 2) the perception of black Americans as inhabiting an autonomous, anti-normalized space.

America was founded upon the racial binary, built upon the racial binary, and all Americans have been fed the racial binary since birth. What is not black is white, and what is not white is black. This means that for those who have come to view middle-class marketplace manhood as a feminizing influence that is not in fact attainable, nor desirable, black society offers an alternative that is ever present and incredibly visible. Some white men, especially those of the working class, are also in a position to have increased interaction with black society, as Amiri Baraka writes in *Blues People*, “the poor white boy in a really integrated neighborhood might pick up ...elements of Negro culture simply as social graces within his immediate group.<sup>lxxiii</sup>” Increased integration also necessarily led to increased possibility for interactions between whites and blacks, and the Great Migration provided the means for many white men to witness black culture to varying degrees.

Within the racial binary, blackness also offers a symbolic antithesis of white values and life. Values such as vulgarity, laziness, sexual virility, and other values not associated with white life are easily placed on black Americans by white society. Blackness, therefore, offers a

remedy to the problems of insecurity that come with the feminizing nature of corporate life. Black men are seen as living outside the strictures of marketplace manhood, operating in control of themselves and in the manner of rugged autonomy, which even the white men most secure in marketplace manhood still feel a need symbolically consume. Therefore, it is enticing to the disillusioned white man to become associated with a black culture that represents to them the epitome of rugged individualism within modern America. Within America, the black spaces within urban America became the symbolic frontier, where white-associated marketplace manhood had not yet penetrated, and therefore offered the only authentic remaining source of rugged individualism.

What is even more convenient about this appropriation of culture is that it can be experienced in degrees. Baraka writes,

“Certainly a white man wearing a zoot suit or talking bop talk cannot enter into the mainstream of American society. More important, that white man does not desire to enter the mainstream (because all he would have to do is change clothes and start "talking right," and he would be easily reinstated). His behavior is indicative on most levels of a conscious nonconformity to important requirements of the society...The white beboppers of the forties were as removed from the society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice.<sup>lxxiv</sup>”

The white individual, because he is separated from black society, is able to accommodate his needs and fill up the vacuum within his identity to the extent that it is needed. He can buy a Jazz album, go to the Jazz club, or play Jazz music professionally, embracing black society to the greatest extent that a member of the white middle-class can. Because the white man is never actually a part of black society, and because he can always leave when he choose and return to white society, he is never truly part of black society, and therefore can never entirely associate himself with the rugged individualism of black society. This is a double-edged sword, because it means that for those who only require a small amount of rugged individualism, commodity consumption allows them to purchase minimal amounts and never truly engage with black society or black individuals. But the white individual who is separated from middle-class marketplace manhood is never able to fully embrace black society and

therefore will always be at least partially alienated from both white and black society. This is the difficulty of seeking vestigial currents of rugged individualism when the frontier has already closed. The frontier has become embodied in a people, and because those people are part of a racial binary, and because the white individual can never be black, he is in limbo if he attempts to mold his identity entirely through association with black autonomous individualism. But there are some individuals who have tried.

In *Wannabes, Goths and Christians*, Amy C. Wilkins documents the Puerto Rican Wannabe subculture during the first decade of the twenty first century. These white women, who seek relationships with Black and Latino men, seek to commit themselves as fully as possible to an identity outside of their initial white identity. Wilkins writes,

“Working-class and poor whites, especially those living in urban or near-urban areas, lack a valorized cultural identity. Because the “redneck” and “hillbilly” identities are associated with rural (and often southern) lifestyles, they don’t make sense in non-rural contexts; moreover, the overt racism frequently attributed to the redneck identity is undesirable to many whites who share space with Blacks and Latino/as. These whites can opt to identify with middle-class white culture, but this option can be demeaning since structural disparities make working-class whites less competitive at the middle-class game. Participation in poor black and Latino/a (hip-hop) cultures, which are visible, thriving, and hip, provide another option.<sup>lxxv</sup>”

Wilkins documents white women from various social strata – including solid middle-class, lower middle-class, and working poor – who have become part of this loose subculture. They view the ultimate commitment to this identity as having a child with a black or Latino man, because this inextricably connects them to these identities and culture. As Wilkins writes, white men – especially those in lower class communities who are not able to reach middle-class ideals of marketplace manhood – are attracted to black culture, which offers an alternative sense of identity. However, they are not physically able to commit to the identity to the same extent that these women can through having a child that they mother. For white men attempting to identify with black autonomous masculinity, having a child means creating a source of responsibility and therefore a loss of autonomy. Therefore, they do not

have the option of solidifying their connection the same way that white women do.

But even these white women, Wilkins writes, are not fully accepted by black or Latino men, or into their culture. This is because despite the fact that they are bringing permanent changes to their lives – through the bearing of multi-racial children – they are still white, and are denied full acceptance and incorporation into black society. Whites are able to demonstrate authenticity and commitment to black culture and society through creating permanent changes in their lives that make some aspects of white society off limits. Wilkins writes: “Wannabes attempt to position themselves into a class and race community by forfeiting the race privileges accorded to white women through their relationships with white men. They also forego the economic advantages promised by middle-class behavior.<sup>lxxvi</sup>” However, they are still not able to renounce all white privilege, and most men and women who are interested in adopting elements of black identity are willing to give up even less. Therefore, there is no full entrance, and even less for the masses of white men who attempt to superficially gain access to the rugged masculinity of black men through commodity consumption, including Gangsta rap.

This situation is different however, for black middle-class men. Because of the racial binary, they are able to more fully enter the realm of the black working-class and the culture of black masculine autonomy. The racial binary means that they are already inherently associated with this lower rung of black society, and therefore if they are unsatisfied with white society, can choose to identify with the autonomous individualism of their less well-off brothers.

### **Embracing ‘Authentic’ Blackness**

Just as members of white society are never fully able to enter black society, the black middle-class is never able to fully become part of white society. Due to the nature of the racial binary, not matter how involved in white life, and no matter how respectable, black

white-collar professionals or members of the upper-class will always be somewhat alienated from white society. A black man can marry a white wife, have light-skinned children and be a beacon of respectability, but he will still be marked as black, and therefore associated with the various meanings of blackness in America.

The balancing act of the black middle-class is such that those who are a part of it can gravitate towards two poles: they are offered partial association in multiple forms of identity, but full association in neither. They can attempt to adhere to white middle-class marketplace manhood norms, they can rebel against such norms and find solidarity with members of the black working class, or they can keep a foot in both and attempt to navigate the incredibly complex web of associations they are wrapped up in.

Those who attempted to fully become part of white marketplace manhood, or attempted to place themselves within white norms in general, could be subject to scorn. Langston Hughes described the desire of many black artists to be viewed as non-racial, transcendent artists as an "urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.<sup>lxxviii</sup>" To conform to this standard was to accept white superiority through normativity. To Hughes, black individuality is rooted in black experience; to attempt to conform to white standards, what he believes is meant by the term "escape race", means that one's true self will not be expressed. The 'true expression' of black experience, in the opinion of Hughes, lies in the daily life and strivings of those who do not seek to conform to the standards that white society sets. This logic could be extended to any black Americans who sought to enter white society, and who therefore repudiated their blackness, not understanding that it was impossible to do so. It was for this reason that Hughes criticized conservative black critic George Schuyler for his reading of black culture as only a facet of American culture. To Hughes, black culture was separate from American (read: white) culture, and therefore any attempts to say otherwise were only attempts at repudiation of blackness.

Many middle-class blacks were not entirely comfortable or entirely fulfilled by only associating themselves with the middle-class notions of marketplace manhood, feeling a need to remain connected to a black culture associated with the working class. In her study on the black middle-class, *Blue Chip Black*, Karyn R. Lacy describes those members of the black middle-class she interviews as making a conscious effort to keep themselves and their children in touch with black culture, because by living in the suburbs they risk falling in with white norms of culture, which they view as unacceptable. Of her interviewees, Lacey writes,

"On the one hand, these parents seek for themselves and their children the option of attending a white college or university, working in a predominantly white occupational category, or living in a majority-white neighborhood. On the other hand, they express concern that complete immersion in the white world will subject their children to racial discrimination, alienate them from the larger black community, and generate nagging doubts about their racial identity and black authenticity. For these reasons, retaining ties to the black world emerges as a central preoccupation among these blacks.<sup>lxxviii</sup>"

They accomplish this through a variety of means. Some of her interviewees joked about still belonging to the working class. "Charlotte," Lacy writes, "connects her class position to the fact she has to work to help support her family. 'I don't care what you are, if you have to work every day, you are po' [poor]! I don't care how much money you make.'<sup>lxxix</sup>" One interviewee described her family as "One paycheck away from poverty," though they were not, in fact, in such a precarious situation. Remaining connected to your roots, or to the black community, therefore, includes not fully assimilating to white norms, or admitting assimilation to white norms.

There are various means of accomplishing this for the black middle-class, and they are similar to the methods employed by white society, but are necessarily more successful. During the Jazz era, many members of the black middle-class became professional Jazz musicians, a profession that had previously only been occupied by members of the black working-class. They had realized through the crises of that period that full integration to

white society was not possible, and that embodying white marketplace manhood was also not possible, and sought a route to affirmation of self. Amiri Baraka writes:

“This was one of the reasons so many college men from the black middle class went back into jazz during the thirties. They had met the superfluous requirements for acceptance into the successful elements of the society, but that acceptance was still withheld.”<sup>lxxxv</sup>

Becoming a Jazz musician was one method of asserting blackness for the middle-class.

Another was occupying the same social space as working-class blacks, which members of the black middle-class had more opportunity to do than whites seeking the rugged autonomy of black culture. Attending Rent Parties during the 1920s and 30s was one such method. These were parties held apart from the more bourgeois oriented parties held by upper-class whites that were multi-racial in character. Martin Summers writes,

“...these [rent] parties gained more popularity among members of the Renaissance who chafed at the exclusionary policies of white-owned clubs and who viewed “slumming,” or the weekly incursions into Harlem by white intellectuals, artists, and socialists, as faddish voyeurism.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> In contrast to the “faddish voyeurism” of these white frequented parties,

“Rent parties occurred in spaces where working-class leisure reigned. Held in private homes where few middle-class slummers dared venture, the parties allowed young working-class and middle-class African Americans and African Caribbeans to mingle and “let loose.”<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

These parties then, represent attempts by black society – both middle and working-class – to keep out white society and create a space through which blacks could connect. The fact that middle-class blacks both were welcome at these parties and dared venture into these spaces where whites would not reveals how their position on the racial binary necessarily entitled them to association with blackness and, to some extent, with working-class blackness.

At these parties, and in black-dominated neighborhoods such as Harlem, middle-class blacks were able to glimpse and associate themselves with alternative forms of masculinity. In these neighborhoods were individuals who represented the antithesis of white middle-

class marketplace manhood. For instance, they were exposed to the 'sweetback', a man who made his living from being the paramour of women, subsisting off of what they would give him in return for his affection. The sweetback, Summers writes,

“represented a sharp divergence from the bourgeois ideal of manliness; his manhood was defined through the presentation of the body and his immersion in consumer culture much more than his commitment to respectability, character, producer values, or traditional notions of patriarchy and separate spheres.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>”

Middle-class black men were exposed to these forms of masculinity, as well as other forms that purposefully dissociated themselves from white marketplace manhood identity for the purposes of creating autonomy.

Members of the black middle-class could therefore be more successful at gaining access to the rugged individualism of the black working-class by virtue of their skin color and mandatory association with black society. That is to say, if a member of the black middle-class, because of very strong dissociation from middle-class marketplace manhood, desired to enter fully into black working-class society, he would have the opportunity to do so to a great extent. However, for much of the black middle-class, the associations that they did have, such as attending rent parties, becoming jazz musicians, attending R&B concerts, or becoming part of certain political associations, was enough to fill in any gaps in their identity.

## Chapter Four: Gangstas in Postmodern America

We see that Gangsta rap and the Gangsta archetype falls into a long tradition of American men seeking to replace marketplace manhood with rugged individualism, with varying degrees of success. Just as each crisis in masculinity is caused by slightly different factors, so too are the cultural forms which American men use to achieve rugged individualism. Because we are focused on the phenomenon of Gangsta rap, it is important that we try to understand its themes, and how they helped men create a sense of identity.

One of the central themes of the Gangsta archetype is a sense of abandonment, and creation of a masculine façade to hide vulnerability. The Gangsta has had control stripped away due to structural factors that discriminate against him in every region of his life, and he is forced to come up with new forms of culture to create a sense of control for himself. The ways in which he does so are 1) through performance of autonomous economic activity that does not adhere to mainstream norms; 2) engaging in homosocial leisure time, when one is able to create a zone of masculinity and masculine behavior; and 3) objectification of women, who are to be used only as passing pleasures due to their inclination to take advantage of men. Through these behavioral patterns, the Gangsta archetype is able to create a prideful and strong demeanor in the face of societal constraints that seek to emasculate and alienate him.

These themes of perseverance despite alienation were incredibly pertinent for Generation X. As Susan Faludi shows in *Stiffed*, baby boomers and their offspring felt as though they had not been given the masculinity that was their birthright. Due to the changing nature of American society in the 1960s through 80s, they were unable to claim the idealized notion of marketplace manhood that was presented to them. Instead, Gangsta emerged and gave them an alternate roadmap through which they could enact manhood.

They could identify with 1) the alienation that these black men suffered (though probably not to the same extent), and 2) were given a method of coping with such alienation, by adopting a new persona that rejected the mainstream notions of marketplace manhood they saw was not representative of themselves. In order to understand this order of events, we first need to explore the themes present in Gangsta rap.

### **Themes of the Gangsta Archetype**

In the song Road to the Riches, Kool G Rap, an early Gangsta rap pioneer, raps,

“When I was five years old I realized there was a road / at the end I will win lots of pots of gold...Been through hard times, even worked part time / In a seafood store sweeping floor sometimes / I was sort of a porter taking the next man’s orders / breaking my back for a shack from headquarters / All my manpower for four bucks an hour...All the freaks wouldn’t speak cause my checks were weak / they would turn the other cheek so I started to seek / a way to get a play, and maybe one day / I’ll be performing up a storm for a decent pay.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>”

This passage represents one of the quintessential narratives of Gangsta rap, and of the Gangsta archetype. In it, the young man attempts to work within the mainstream economy, but soon realizes that this will get him nowhere. Kool G Rap is ostracized by his peers because he is working such long hours while getting ‘weak checks,’ or low pay. His strategy becomes to make money through two available routes, either 1) through performance (specifically rapping) or 2) selling drugs, as Kool G Rap illuminates when he raps, “I used to stand on the block selling cooked up rock / money bustin’ out of the socks cause I really would clock.<sup>lxxxv</sup>” Therefore, because the only work available in the legitimate economy is unrewarding and emasculating, only rapping or drug dealing remain as viable options.

Drug dealing, described by many Gangsta rappers as their first encounter with entrepreneurial business (and often abandoned once their rap career took off), is necessarily

dangerous. Many Gangsta rap songs include narratives in which the Gangsta narrator is forced to kill other drug dealers for access to turf, or for vengeance over a conflict. In a community in which resources are scarce and money is to be made through illegal activity, violence comes with the territory. Though the choice to deal drugs is one that the Gangsta narrator inevitably makes, because it is the avenue through which money flows, and money is required for status, some Gangsta narratives show the instability of a hustling lifestyle and the desire for something else.

There needs to be a strong reason that the Gangsta would take the risk of hustling. The basic reason is that this is an avenue to make money, but money is not valuable in and of itself. Rather, money is the means through which the Gangsta can increase the status of himself and his crew, increasing homosocial bonds between group members. It is through these bonds, and the exclusion of other groups – or cliques – that the Gangsta finds a homosocial space where he can truly feel masculine. The connection between hustling and homosocial bonding is shown through Jay Z's lyrics in *Can I Live*, where he raps, “Y’all niggas lunching, punching the clock / my function is to make much and lay back munching / Sipping Remy on the rocks, my crew something to watch.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Here, Jay Z derides those in occupations that require menial work (“punching the clock”) and enhances his status through making money quickly and then enjoying leisure time with his crew, or social group. DMX also makes this connection in Ruff Ryders’ Anthem, where he raps, “I extort to support my peeps.”<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Money is valuable as a means of creating leisure time with other young men.

In his track *It Was a Good Day*, Ice Cube lays out an idyllic day, much of which is spent on homosocial activities. First he raps of playing basketball: “Called up the homies and I’m asking y’all / “Which park are y’all playing basketball?”<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Later on, he goes to a friend’s house and plays dice and dominos: “Went to Short Dog’s house, they was watching “Yo! MTV Raps!” / What’s the haps on the craps? / Shake 'em up, shake 'em up, shake 'em

up, shake 'em / Roll 'em in a circle of niggas and watch me break 'em...Then we played bones, and I'm yelling domino.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Not once in this song, describing a perfect day, is economic activity mentioned. So though hustling can be a source of pride, that pride is often connected to gaining status among one's peers. So in addition to the prestige that comes with being about to make money is the pride one gains among one's peers, as well as the monetary ability to spend money among one's friends.

Relationships with women also play an important role in Gangsta narratives, in which women are passing pleasures used to construct masculinity. In *It Was a Good Day*, Ice Cube mentions multiple women, none of whom are viewed as anything more than passing pleasures. He raps, "Finally got a call from a girl I wanna dig out," "I got a beep from Kim, and she can fuck all night," "Picked up a girl been tryna fuck since the 12<sup>th</sup> grade," and after sleeping with a woman, "Woke her up around one / She didn't hesitate to call Ice Cube the top gun...Dropped her ass off and then chirped out.<sup>xc</sup>" In Ice Cube's story, the majority of the day is taken up with spending time with his friends, and then engaging in intercourse with a woman and dropping her off back at home. There is no intimacy described, only the search for the sexual act, and the result of the sexual act, Ice Cube being called the "top gun." Therefore, being able to convince women to have sex is a source of pride for the Gangsta, and is connected to the pimp trope in black oral storytelling. In traditional toasts, Eithne Quinn writes, the pimp is a character that is able to dominate women through words<sup>xc</sup>. In *It Was a Good Day*, Ice Cube actually calls himself a pimp, rapping, "Even saw the lights of the Goodyear Blimp / and it read Ice Cube's a pimp."<sup>xcii</sup>

Women are also connected to the economic activity of the Gangsta in that women are seen as goldiggers who will attempt to separate the Gangsta from his money, and are only attracted to men with money. This creates a dilemma then, as the Gangsta has to make money to get women, but then worries about being taken advantage of. In these cases, the Gangsta often returns to the homosocial preserve of his friends. 2pac raps on *Ambitionz*

AZ a Ridah, “Can’t trust a bitch in the business so I go with Death Row / Now these money hungry bitches getting suspicious / Started plotting and planning on schemes, to come and trick us. <sup>xciii</sup>” In this rhyme, 2pac equates those in the record business with money-hungry women attempting to separate him from his money, and says that he goes with Death Row, his record label, with whom he developed a close attachment and friendship. This represents his homosocial preserve among women who can imbue a sense of pride and accomplishment through sex, but who also represent danger.

This world that the Gangsta inhabits is also inherently alienating, and the Gangsta feels abandoned by the world. This is not necessarily the theme of most Gangsta rap, because much of Gangsta rap is anti-sentimental and boastful by nature, but some songs and rhymes focus on this aspect which gives new meaning to the prideful boasting of killings and misogyny. There is a fatalistic understanding of the life of the Gangsta. Ice Cube’s perfect day is made better by the fact that “nobody I know got killed in South Central LA,” and he “can’t believe today was a good day. <sup>xciv</sup>” A good day is therefore not the norm, and the life of the Gangsta is painful and difficult, with the specter of death always looming. Geto Boys’s *Mind Playin’ Tricks on Me* is perhaps the best example of these sentiments - an entire song devoted to the paranoia that develops among the Gangsta in his quest for control in an environment that attempts to deny it to him. Scarface raps,

“Day by day it’s more impossible to cope / I feel like I’m the one that’s doing dope / Can’t keep a steady hand because I’m nervous/ Every Sunday morning I’m in service / praying for forgiveness / and trying to find an exit out the business / I know the lord is lookin’ at me / But yet and still it’s hard for me to feel happy / I often drift while I drive / having fatal thoughts of suicide. <sup>xcv</sup>”

This undercurrent, which only surfaces occasionally in Gangsta rap, highlights the nature of Gangsta behavior, which is an attempt to reassert masculine control in an unstable environment, where resources to do so are not to be had.

DMX sums up the attitude of the Gangsta very succinctly on Ruff Ryders' Anthem:

“Home of the brave, my home is a cage / And yo I'ma slave til' my home is a grave / I'ma pull capers, it's all about the papers/ Bitches caught the vapors, and now they wanna rape us.”<sup>xcvi</sup>

This idea of societal abandonment is present not just in rap, but also in other forms of contemporary music (including Hardcore, Metal etc). But Gangsta rap is unique in that it provides a narrative of masculine response by men who have been utterly abandoned by the state and the economy. That response is to work in an autonomous, entrepreneurial profession so that one may control women through convincing them to have casual sex, and then relaxing in the homosocial atmosphere of a peer group. This was a formula that many American men outside the black working-class sought as a means of coping with their own alienation.

### **Music as Symbolic Resistance to Alienation**

All music is symbolic, and can provide symbolic support for our conception of ourselves. Gangsta especially is able to do this because of its strong lyrical content, and narrative method.

George Lipsitz gives us a good example of how music functions in relation to identity by relating the consumption practices of American pre-teen girls in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The consumption practices of these girls result directly from what society expects of them, and therefore what they expect of themselves. Besides the sense of community that girls share with one another built around enjoying the music, the particular image of boy bands is appealing to pre-teen and teenage girls<sup>xcvii</sup>. “Boy bands,” Lipsitz writes, “prey on the contradictions endemic to sexism and consumption in our society...” and “add to the insecurities of young girls by having them focus on young men as objects of admiration, by encouraging them to inhabit a state of romantic longing as an end in itself, and by suggesting that erotic and romantic desire can be fulfilled by purchasing the appropriate commodity.”<sup>xcviii</sup>

In addition to satisfying the need girls have to demonstrate their attraction to men, boy band fandom allows them to bond with other girls through shared mutual appreciation of the singers as objects of attraction. But society cannot allow the female bonding to become too homosocial, Lipsitz argues. They are not allowed to worship female bands because then they are not being socialized to idolize male attractiveness, and this does not fit with the script of a heterosexually based normativity. “At a time when young girls might be most insecure about their own changing bodies,” Lipsitz writes, “focusing on boy bands turns their gaze away from themselves and onto males.”<sup>xcix</sup> When the female community is formed around the basis of worshipping the idea of the male body, it socializes them to fulfill their future societal role as wives and girlfriends. Boy bands are safe as well, because there is no real threat of physical engagement, and the band members themselves are somewhat de-sexualized, as they are very young themselves.

Young men also have a societal scrip according to which they act, and theirs tells them different things from that of pre-teen girls. The male script is necessarily the inverse of that of the girls. Whereas girls are being prepared and preparing themselves for a life of heterosexual relationships with men, men are doing so with women in mind. Gangsta rap therefore fills a similar role that Boy Bands do for girls, but in a different way. The image of the Gangsta helps young men create an idea about themselves that they can believe themselves to possess. When they listen to Gangsta, they gain that knowledge about themselves and their potential to act in that specific manner (even if it is never really possible for them to do so). Gangsta rap informs young men on the three different areas of their lives that are also the main themes in the music: 1) economic activity, 2) homosocial bonding, and 3) women.

These three themes are connected in the minds of the young men consuming Gangsta, as they are in the music itself. They are 1) not able to conform to traditional standards of middle-class marketplace manhood, 2) are not able to have the dominating relationship to women that was previously available, and therefore 3) have to fall back on

homosocial bonding as a method of feeling like a man. Work became unavailable, and so women could not be controlled through the normal methods. The rise in sexual violence rates in the 1980 coincided with the rise of new homosocial-based male bonding groups such as the Promise Keepers, which sought to bring men closer together and also to recreate traditional male-female relationships. This increase in sexual violence and male bonding are two sides of the same coin, meaning the displacement of male identity and their need to recreate it. Gangsta as well as Expressive Individualism gave men outlets through which they could understand themselves as rugged individuals trapped with a suburban (or urban) setting, and not as confined as they actually felt. The possibility of being that autonomous, that free, was enticing, and worth the price of a CD.

## Conclusions

Gangsta rap came to fruition as part of a larger historical trend that allowed individuals living within the confines of middle-class marketplace manhood to symbolically associate themselves with rugged individualism and autonomous living. It was everything that everyone needed it to be. It promoted a discourse that conveyed control (or at least the appearance of it), dominance of one's surroundings, nonconformity to the standards of white America, and a will to survive that those who consumed it admired. It came at a time when the psyche of the American white male was unstable, as women were making gains in traditionally male territory (the workplace, public life) and forcing men to reconsider their place. Gangsta was a way for males (and especially young males) to believe that they shared this potential for control that Gangstas apparently had (even if many Gangsta rappers did not actually have very "Gangsta-ish" lives).

However, appropriation of Gangsta rap (or Jazz, R&B, or any other black style for that matter) was not necessarily as sincerely felt as this. Gangsta was also consumed due to white narcissism and latent racist stereotyping. Whites had the ability consume Gangsta, listen to Jazz or other black music, and then use that comparison to highlight their own superiority. White audiences secure in their marketplace manhood identity could consume images of black men as savage and brutalistic, and highlight their own 'civilized' nature. By seeing the contrast in their living situation and those of the Gangsta, they would see how comparatively well off they were, and how those forms of violence and hardship were not present in their life. In this way, Gangsta rap could function as a method of reifying racial or class privilege.

But it was not necessarily one or the other: insincerity vs. sincerity. These mentalities could function together, and even those whites or middle-class blacks most dismissive of the

Gangsta behavior might feel a twinge of empathy and jealousy at the exciting lifestyle lived by the Gangsta, even as they were glad they themselves were not living it. The sincere listener, who desired that exciting life and the control it offered still might feel a little bit better about themselves for not living that life; it is hard to abandon racial or class superiority entirely, as they are methods of creating self-esteem as to preserve the integrity of the social grouping.

Another characteristic that influenced the development of Gangsta is the time into which it was born. The overwhelming popularity of Gangsta would not have been possible in any other era, because no other era had ever had capitalism enter their private lives to such an extent. While identity has always been marketed, it was in the 1980s and 90s that marketers began responding to the need of consumers (especially teenagers) who were increasingly unsure of their identities. Those Expressive Individualists mentioned earlier could not reach their inner selves without the ability to make choices on a regular basis, and commodity consumption was often the path of least resistance. Subcultural affiliation often became murky when stores such as Hot Topic began marketing 'punk' clothes, and it became impossible to tell whether or not a person was truly committed to group identity – that is, whether they were 'authentic,' or a 'poser.'

Group identity then became easier to purchase in the postmodern era, and Gangsta was no exception. The successes of 'urban' clothing companies such as FUBU (which had revenues of \$200 million in 1998<sup>6</sup>), Phat Farm, Rocawear, and Sean John made embracing black identity as easy as purchasing a fifty-dollar hockey jersey or cargo shorts with a big logo to make sure others knew your new affiliation. In addition to brands that specialized in urban wear, huge brands such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger changed launched new lines intended to appeal to this new spectrum of consumers.

This natural capitalistic expansion to meet the needs of consumers meant that for those with the money to do so, trappings of group affiliation could be purchased (even if it

did not confer authenticity, or respect of that status within the group), and changed up, if need be. However, because these commodities were purchased, and because they were exchangeable, they necessarily were shallow. They did not require the commitment of anything except for money, and for much of the middle-class a CD or cassette tape was a small monetary expense. Most white (and many black) consumers of Gangsta would never experience the poor, dangerous neighborhoods and conditions depicted within the narratives of Gangsta rap. Instead, they would imitate the lifestyle of Gangstas (by consuming drugs, alcohol, and forming homosocial peer groups around ideas of autonomous control) in the safety of the suburbs. When they were finished with the identity, they could turn off the stereo, change clothes, and become 'normal' once again. Gangsta rap could impart a transitory affiliation with autonomy, and then be discarded when needed. This was offered by commodities, and consumed in great quantities by the awaiting public who couldn't wait to get a glimpse of the frontier.

The mechanism through which these forms of music become ingrained in the psyche of America is negligence. There are countless forms of music that could be selected for by the recording industry and mass-produced. Early on in Gangsta's existence, much of the content was reserved for political messages, specifically those that were anti-police and anti-discrimination. Because of political pressure applied to the industry by Conservative groups, that content was forced out. What remained was fetishization of money and success, and a domineering attitude towards women. While many feminist authors and groups offered critiques of these attitudes, they were unable to apply pressure to the extent that the Conservative lobby was able to, and therefore, the music was not sanitized to a greater degree. Backlash had helped created conditions amenable to the degradation of women, and parents were not inclined to keep that out of their homes, and the record industry was inclined to sell it. Through a complex filtering process where different interest groups register their power and attempt to delineate values, the music that is socially acceptable emerges, and Gangsta is no different.

Therefore, no matter how much conservative groups and Civil Rights era black Americans protested, Gangsta was allowed to exist due to the nature of capitalism. While the ideas that it embodied were antithetical to the ideals of middle-class marketplace manhood, they were not antithetical to patriarchal notions in general, and many men flocked to these rugged individualist notions of the self instead.

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> Time International, 1999
- <sup>ii</sup> Time International, 1999
- <sup>iii</sup> Time International, 1999
- <sup>iv</sup> Rose, 2008
- <sup>v</sup> Rose, 2008
- <sup>vi</sup> Kimmel, 38
- <sup>vii</sup> Kimmel, 38
- <sup>viii</sup> Kimmel, 38
- <sup>ix</sup> Kimmel, 23
- <sup>x</sup> Tatum, 23
- <sup>xi</sup> The theoretical guidelines of this paper are largely based on readings of Foucault, specifically those that consider the relationship of knowledge and power.
- <sup>xii</sup> For a description of the changing nature of the suburbs, post World War II, see Avila, 5-18
- <sup>xiii</sup> West, 35
- <sup>xiv</sup> Leinberger; Tucker, 125
- <sup>xv</sup> Leinberger; Tucker, 125
- <sup>xvi</sup> Leinberger; Tucker, 125
- <sup>xvii</sup> Kelley, 223
- <sup>xviii</sup> Lipsitz, 1998, 15
- <sup>xix</sup> Leinberger; Tucker, 125
- <sup>xx</sup> Lipsitz, 1998, 6
- <sup>xxi</sup> Lipsitz, 1998, 7
- <sup>xxii</sup> Lipsitz, 1998, 14
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Lacy, 30
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Summers, 21
- <sup>xxv</sup> Summers, 22
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Summers, 22
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Summers, 87
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Bracey, 25
- <sup>xxix</sup> West, 53
- <sup>xxx</sup> Bracey, 48
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Lipsitz, 2007, 168
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Lipsitz, 1997, 12
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Lipsitz, 1998, 13
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> West, 7
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Bourgois, 1996
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Newton, 41
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Kelley, 179
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Kelley, 174
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Kelley, 169
- <sup>xl</sup> See Quinn, 94-140 for a detailed analysis of badman lore and pimp narratives within Gangsta rap and the toast tradition.
- <sup>xli</sup> Faludi, 1999, 14
- <sup>xlii</sup> Kimmel, 35
- <sup>xliiii</sup> Kimmel, 44
- <sup>xliv</sup> Kimmel, 96
- <sup>xlv</sup> Faludi, 1999, 29

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- xlvi Weber, 181  
 xlvii Faludi, 1999, 82  
 xlviii West, 5  
 xlix Lipsitz, 2007, 160  
 l Faludi, 1991, 80  
 li West, 6  
 lii Leinberger; Tucker, 122  
 liii Leinberger; Tucker, 122  
 liv Lipsitz, 2007, 160  
 lv Faludi, 1991  
 lvi Youth Suicide is Rising, New York Times  
  
 lvii Youth Suicide is Rising, New York Times  
 lviii Barron, 1987  
  
 lix West, 15  
 lx Faludi, 1991, 9  
 lxi Tatum, 53  
 lxii Tatum, 23  
 lxiii Yancy, 11  
 lxiv See Haenfler, 150-168 for examples of how Straight Edge affiliation ends as the individual grows into their 20s.  
 lxv See Arnett, *Metal Heads* for an overview of white youth alienation.  
 lxvi Bellah, 2007  
 lxvii Leinberger; Tucker, 260  
  
 lxviii Leinberger; Tucker, 263  
 lxix Newton, 55  
 lxx Newton, 58  
 lxxi Carroll; Holtzman, 2002  
 lxxii Carroll, Holtzman, 2002  
 lxxiii Baraka, 188  
 lxxiv Baraka, 188  
 lxxv Wilkins, 221  
 lxxvi Wilkins, 234  
 lxxvii Hughes, 1926  
 lxxviii Lacy, 152  
 lxxix Lacy, 34  
 lxxx Baraka, 186  
 lxxxi Summers, 177  
 lxxxii Summers, 177  
 lxxxiii Summers 179  
 lxxxiv Kool G Rap, 1989  
 lxxxv Kool G Rap, 1989  
 lxxxvi Jay Z, 1996  
 lxxxvii DMX, 1997  
 lxxxviii Ice Cube, 1993  
 lxxxix Ice Cube, 1993  
 xc Ice Cube, 1993  
 xci Quinn, 2004  
 xcii Ice Cube, 1993  
 xciii 2pac, 1996

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- <sup>xciv</sup> Ice Cub, 1993  
<sup>xcv</sup> Geto Boys, 1991  
<sup>xcvi</sup> DMX, 1997  
<sup>xcvii</sup> Lipsitz, 2007  
<sup>xcviii</sup> Lipsitz, 2007, 5  
<sup>xcix</sup> Lipsitz, 2007, 5  
<sup>c</sup> Goldstein, 1998

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