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Power, money, and sex(uality): the Black Masculine Paradigm

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POWER, MONEY, AND SEX(UALITY): THE BLACK MASCULINE
PARADIGM

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Abstract

This study develops the Black Masculine Paradigm (BMP), a construct used to trace historically specific components that inform black masculinity and explores the physical and psychological defensive strategies employed by black men in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promisedland*, Nathan McCall's *Make Me Wanna Holler*, and James Earl Hardy's *B-Boy Blues*. Specifically, this project offers that power, money, and sex(uality) are located at the core of the BMP, and these social objectives are negotiated through politicization, prescribed masculinity, and heterosexuality. This project reads the politicization of the black male body through its presence in literature and film. Adding to work included by literary and cultural studies scholars, the study has social and psychological dimensions that suggest an alternate form of black masculinity as well. The study reveals that these strategies affect the black males' economic, social and physical movement, and creates a corrupt national narrative that is informed and disrupted by racism.

The worst part of the masculine scream is that
the feminine ear can not hear our frequency. T.D. Jakes

Chapter 1: Contextualizing Black Masculinity: Scope, Definition, and Significance

This project develops the Black Masculine Paradigm (BMP), a construct I use to trace historically specific components that inform black masculinity in the U.S. First, I extend and further define what Richard Majors and Janet Billson refer to as "cool pose," the physical and psychological defensive strategies employed by black men to maintain detachment in tense encounters, and I wed it to the effect of man's limited economic, social and physical movement, and a corrupt national narrative informed and disrupted by racism. The notion of black masculinity that prevails in contemporary critical discourse focuses on the single components that make up black masculinity, particularly behavior and performance, and materialism. Specifically, I offer that power, money, and sex(uality) are located at the core of the BMP, and these social objectives are negotiated through the paradigm's major components: freedom of movement and politics of the body. My project then reads the politicization of the black male body through its presence in literature and film. Adding to work included by literary and cultural studies scholars, my study has social and psychological dimensions that suggest an alternate mode of black

masculinity as well. Using the trickster and bad-man figure as archetypes of black masculinity, I read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* to explore physical, social, and economic movement. Further, I use the films, *Boyz' N the Hood*, and *Menace II Society* to demonstrate the importance of performance in black male self-representation. Finally, I employ the novels of Wright, Brown, McCall and James Hardy *B-Boy Blues* to read sexuality as a problematic design for masculinity.

Defining and Extending the Notion of "Cool Pose"

Majors and Billson's theory of "cool pose" places black males on a collision course with white social institutions. They posit "being male and black has meant being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated "(1). Of course, many black men define their manhood the same as white men do—as breadwinner, provider, procreator, and protector. However, because black men have not had consistent access to social capital they need in order to fulfill their dreams of masculinity, cool pose becomes a surrogate for masculinity, adopted mostly by young inner city black males, "that is used as a tool for hammering masculinity out of the bronze of their daily lives in

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a restrictive society" (2). It consists of the physical—unique patterns of speech, walk, demeanor, dress, and psychological components—poise under pressure, the ability to maintain detachment from emotions and tense encounters; all of these act as "a defense to ward off the ill effects of racial oppression and social inequality" (2-3). "Cool pose" for some black males becomes more important than life itself, which explains

> the fact that African-American males die earlier and faster than white males from suicide, homicide, accidents, and stress-related illnesses; that black males are more deeply involved in criminal and delinquent activities; that they drop out of school or are suspended more often than white children; and that they have more volatile relationships with women. (2)

Thus, cool pose can end in destruction, if black men cannot navigate through hegemonic social institutions.

Essentially, cool pose is a coping mechanism that black men use to develop a distinct form of black male aesthetics, behaviors and actions that they see as essentially male, and/or as acting male. I argue that in contemporary America cool pose is an articulation of masculinity that synthesizes tropes of the trickster/bad-man figure, and this modified version of black manhood demonstrates the increasing importance and changing definitions of masculinity from slavery to the post-modern era. Majors and Billson trace various forms of cool pose to African Culture in which the people were in harmony (cool) with

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nature.   I posit that filtering cool pose through the lens of the trickster/bad-man figure reveals it as a definitive trickster trope, reconfiguring Majors and Billson's limited construct that addresses ritualized sexuality, yet hardly considers heterosexuality as a masculine construct, nor addresses homophobia. Further, I use Maurice Wallace's idea of black male specularity to examine the current placement of black men in the American national narrative. Integrating Wallace's notion into my framework allows me to read masculine performance as internalized racism and as a coping strategy.   The wide critical net I cast produces a more inclusive mapping of black masculinity.

Freedom of Movement and Politicization of the Black Male Body

Freedom of movement refers to the ways in which black men have been limited because of racism: physically, socially, and economically. Physical and social mobility refers to the limited restriction of blacks during slavery and segregation in which they could not utilize the same facilities as whites. This project positions racism as a restrictor of black males' social mobility in American institutions. Economic movement, which greatly affects social mobility, refers to black men's ability to achieve financial success and the false status it creates. As Christopher B. Booker's *I Will Wear No Chain*! argues, the greatest obstacle for black men to overcome is the legacy of slavery and Jim

Crow.   Because slavery took the place of family and responsibility, it forced black men to reconstruct their masculinity in terms of sexual prowess and materialism; yet, the modern world requires black men to overcome the social fallout of Jim Crow. Jabari Asim suggests that the social remains of Jim Crow cast a veil over black men's attempts to confront current forms of inequities "within the context of an increasing globalized economy and polity" (i).   Thus, as America's wealth and ideas extend beyond its geographical border, the black voice is seldom heard.   This silence emblematizes the remaining elements of Jim Crow within the educational and criminal justice system. Asim's "Black Man Standing" implies that black men, in order to fulfill Christopher Booker's plea to overcome the legacy of slavery, must deal with modern day white supremacy.   For example, black athletes adorn the fields of many predominately white universities but are scarce in their graduate programs. Asim asserts that the forces of white supremacy today have "replaced their customary rabble-housing inanities with the subtler jargon of judicial retrenchment and ill-conceived 'contracts with America" (30). Indeed, according to Ellis Cose, black males are twice as likely to receive jail time than their white counter-parts for the same offense (6), as these "contracts" put black men in the unique position of desiring protection from the law in

a nation that theoretically guarantees such protection yet practically neglects that responsibility.

Consequently, the black male body becomes politicized. Politicization happens when the ethnic body commits a severe crime. For instance, people who were and appeared Arab were intensely viewed with suspicion and received harsh treatment after 9/11. This image, however, is not as solidified as the black male image. Whites have also been politicized to some degree, but white males still control mechanisms that check and balance their politicization. White males commit crimes too, but they are not criminalized within the national narrative. That is, no one rounded up bald headed white men after the Oklahoma City bombing. White men are also negatively portrayed in film, but enough diverse portrayals exist to prevent negative representation from becoming a definitive image. Despite slavery and its complexity of white involvement, all white men have not been politicized as racist. The politicization that has occurred does not limit white men's social, economic, or physical mobility because they control most of the institutions that restrict these movements for black men and have had a hand in the institutional design: the education system, criminal justice system, etc. The proof of the politicization that has occurred to black men lies in black men who are able to navigate social institutions and become successful. Take a middle class black

man who has never had problems with the justice system, performed well in primary and higher education, and achieved a comfortable economic and social existence. His status works well in his immediate social environments: at work, in his community, and around his friends. However, outside this world, at any moment, he can be a victim of politicization. The ongoing situation in New York City in which some cab drivers will not pick up black men is very telling of this process.

Mark Neal and E. Lynn Harris argue that middle class status does not protect black men from police brutality and its inherent racist assumptions. This status is effective in certain environments, but at any given point any black males regardless of status, may be seen as "just another nigger," making them easy scapegoats. Economic status is very important within the BMP, for black men have been limited to a certain level of masculinity because their identity is condensed into stereotyped blackness. In other words because of racism, financially successful black men can only achieve a certain level of masculinity. One black man represents all black men. For example, when one black man becomes a perpetrator, all black men become collapsed into him. It happens so frequently that many black men have become members of the "please-don't-let-them-be-black" club (Harris 21). Neal and Harris's commentary goes behind the mask of financial

success to examine how black male wealth does not increase their masculine status.

Much of the racism that limits black men's mobility is located in the negative portrayals of black men as beasts, criminals, and buffoons. During slavery, the dominant caricatures of blacks as mammy, coon, tom, and pickaninny portrayed them as ignorant, docile, and groveling. These caricatures were performed in minstrels that answered deep psychic needs for white audiences (Boskin and Dorinson 93). For blacks, this ridicule forged psychic chains: a bag for Uncle Ben, a box for Aunt Jemima, a cabin in the sky for Uncle Tom, and a pancake restaurant chain for Sambo (94). Such images positioned white men within the institution of slavery as the paternalistic caretakers of slaves. Pragmatic and instrumental, these representations were created from whites' need to oppress blacks. For example, during the Reconstruction Period, many white writers like Thomas Nelson Page argued that without slavery's suppression of blacks' animalistic tendencies, especially men, blacks would revert to criminal savagery. Thus, the brute caricature began the politicization of black men within the national narrative and was solidified.

Novels like Thomas Dixon's, <u>The Leopard's Spots</u> (1902) and <u>The Clansman</u> (1905)—which presented black men as half-human, half-animal stalkers who sought to rape white women—and *The Birth of the*

Nation and similar films translated the brute image into a fixed visual form. Newspapers perpetuated the brute image through the savage language used to refer to black men. *The Arkansas Gazette* in 1927 records the following comments about a lynching: "Mob's Lynching of Negro Brute Starts Trouble. Black Attacks Mother and Daughter West of City. Is Hanged to Pole. Captured After Long Search Through Wooded Region. Confesses He Is Guilty." Comparatively, the *New York Amsterdam News* reports the same story: "Little Rock Mob Lynches Youth. Had Been Accused of Attacking a Mother and Her Daughter." Clearly one can see how negative language and images affect representation. With decades of dehumanizing presentations, negative images found a permanent place in the black male's consciousness and in America's national narrative. As a result of internalizing these images, some black men today have become super-masculine to survive certain social environments and/or to gain masculine status; simultaneously, they become a threat to themselves, black women, and society.

Critics acknowledge the importance of mainstream and independent film and video to the larger cultural project of redefining masculinity. Nonetheless, these scholars eschew the ways in which cinematic representations of black men often betray a subtext of hostility and misappropriation in their analyses. Elizabeth Alexander's

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"We're Gonna Deconstruct Your Life!: The Making and Un-Making of the Black Bourgeois Patriarch in *Ricochet*" contends that the film invents a prototypical black bourgeois family of the 1980s and then dismantles it entirely (157). Alexander reveals the fundamental fragility of black economic progress in the film and white male antagonism towards such progress. While Alexander primarily focuses on black men in mainstream Hollywood films, Wahneema Lubiano's "But Compared to What: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in School Daze, Do the Right Thing, and the Spike Lee Discourse" focuses on black films as spectacles of African American Cultural Production. The BMP utilizes Lubiano's analysis to explain how these films are also problematic when portraying black men and to expose the filmmakers' inability to remain fully aware of the importance of casting various black male representations in the media.

While Alexander and Lubiano argue that these negative depictions of black men make them representative victims of white popular media, Michele Wallace argues that black men, on and off camera, promote negative images about themselves, and that being black politically correct "is precisely the issue when it comes to the general inability of the dominant culture to take black people seriously and to see them as [diverse] human beings" (300). Thus, it becomes imbedded in both the white and black psyches that certain ways of

acting or behaving represented in films, are indeed black. As long as the media's failure to portray diversity among black men reinforces negative images, the identity of black men will always be seen as monolithic and politically problematic. A problematic identity restricts black men to particular social spheres.

Like the representation of black men in film, images of black athletes are also troublesome. Eva Bosenberg and Lindon Barrett examine the glorification of athletic black manhood and its consequences. Boesenberg's "Who's Afraid of Shaq Attaq? Constructions of Black Masculinity in the NBA" maintains that Shaquille O'Neal, Dennis Rodman, and Michael Jordan embody three different versions of masculinity. Their popularity hinges on the manner in which each responds to stereotypes of black men (682). Shaq represents brute force and physicality due to his size; Rodman is the black chameleon that pushes the performance of masculinity without feeling threatened; and Jordan exists between the two because he is the least aggressive and easier to mold. In regard to athletes, the BMP is not only concerned with physicality but also with how their popularity and wealth/materialism translate into a facet of masculinity that informs economic and social mobility. Specifically, the BMP analyzes the masculine paradox that allows the cultural elevation of Jordan and Shaq to "coexist with the [general] economic and political

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marginality of [everyday] African-American males" (Gates XV). I contend Jordan and Shaq's elevated status relies on a preconceived notion about black men. They are performers, objects appealing to and conditioned by the white male gaze—which permits these athletes only a limited function within the current narrative.

At the center of the national narrative is racism, which effectively alienates black men from the social institutions that are designed to prepare them to be productive citizens. Further, because preconceived notions about the capabilities of black men in certain situations permeate these institutions, black men are destined to fail. For example, schools that require uniforms are forced to confront black males who alter the look of the uniform by sagging their pants and clipping their ties to their shirt pockets. Driven by a compulsion to look "cool" and/or definitively black and male, a characteristic that within the student's cultural environment endows status, the student reinforces the popular conception of young black men as rule breakers/trouble makers. When the institution enforces its rule, as it must, the student is extracted from the institution and possibly loses the opportunity to reap its benefits. The false dichotomy between status and participation in traditional societal structures is reinforced and the negative consequences of the divide result in further black male alienation that restricts social and economic mobility.

These internalized racial notions—and their prescription of failure—cause an alienation, "which entails an immediate recognition by black men of social and economic realities [that support] an inferiority complex" (Fanon 13). Black men's internalizing of these racist notions makes it difficult for them to conform to societal norms. "The Assassination of the Black Male Image," by Earl Ofari Hutchinson and Paul Hoch's *White Hero Black Beast: Racism, Sexism and the Mask of Masculinity* situate Fanon's analysis of black male alienation. Hutchinson posits that the image of the malevolent black male is based on durable and time-resistant myths, half-truths, and lies. He further explains that this "image was created during the European conquest of Africa, nurtured during slavery, artfully refined during segregation, and revived during the Ronald Reagan—George Bush-Newt Gingrich years" (15). Thus, many have profited handsomely from the lucrative growth industry America has fashioned out of black-male bashing. The result of such bashing is sexual paranoia and representational black male criminality. Hoch extends Fanon by dissecting the patterns of male socialization within particular institutional structures and the instruments that create such structures. He asserts that blacks in general have been thrust into primarily white social institutions. For instance, in regard to education, it may be that African-Americans learn differently and need

a more efficient educational design. The same can be said for health care, welfare, and other institutions that aid Americans. Most of these institutions have a hegemonic base and design and have paid little or no attention to the conditioning of African-Americans. Many African - Americans have proven that they can adapt to and benefit from these institutions, but many more would if the base of these institutions were redesigned with diversity in mind. Black men and women have always had to situate their existence within white social institutions. The representations that racism disrupts for them must be decolonized internally in order to decolorize them nationally. Black men in particular need to equip themselves with tools that allow them to navigate within American social institutions in order to increase social and economic mobility.

The BMP locates social alienation, sexual paranoia, and Fanon's idea of epidermalization at the core of the formation of black masculine identity and examines how these are negotiated in response to social and personal imperatives, responsibilities and problems. In regard to race, the BMP specifically utilizes Maurice Wallace's notion of identity politics and the burden of black male specularity. Wallace asserts that images of black men are "ideographs for the American propensity to see black men half-blindly as a blank/black page onto which the identity theme of American whiteness imprints itself as onto

a photographic negative" (32). This process, spectragraphia , is so powerful that even a blind person can summon the images/representations of the black male body as viewed by society, especially negative ones. Spectragraphia partially explains why black men are not viewed as individuals and why physicality is so important to their masculine identity. The BMP maps the various ways racism affects black males.

When one combines the politics of race, as mentioned earlier, with the politics of sexuality, black men are faced with a double-edged sword when seeking a masculine identity. This goal becomes problematic as race disrupts the quest. Black men often equate masculinity with white men; yet, most of the time black men lack access to that masculine design. Consequently, black men need to assemble a masculine identity that allows unity with black women and that recasts popular media images as individual representations rather than racial and/or cultural ones. Such recasting is necessary, according to bell hooks's "Doing it For Daddy," because the drive for white masculinity, presented as an ideal in America, only serves to strengthen white male hegemony, "leaving black males tortured by an unrequited longing for white male love" (98). This torture manifests in white cultural presentations of black men. Television, film, and advertising, hooks suggests, socialize black males to see themselves

as always lacking, as always subordinated to more powerful white males whose approval they need to survive (99). This socialization process is important to white male patriarchy and essential to its maintenance of masculinity. Thus, the masculinity that black men seek to replicate encourages them to embrace a worldview where white men are all-powerful, forming the "white man keeping me down syndrome."

While hooks suggests that black men's longing to replicate white masculinity is mostly problematic for black men, Derrick Bell's "The Race-Charged Relationship of Black Men and Black Women" and Daniel Black's *Dismantling Black Manhood: A Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* both examine how hooks's concept of "white male love" affects black women as well. Bell maintains that "racism has exacerbated for blacks the always-difficult social relationship between men and women" (198). That is, black men are so determined to assume the role as protector like their white counterparts that they fail to understand that the legacy of slavery has conditioned black women to need stability from black men rather than their protection. Similarly, Black argues that the institution of slavery erased black men's roles as warrior, father, and protector, supplementing these with the characteristics of sexual prowess, materialism, and household domination, which disrupt the black family

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and community. A more desirable option would be that black men recast the whole protective role to a form that allows them to become one with black women in order to effectively confront the common enemy: racism

Criticism on the effects of white/ideal masculinity informs the BMP's exploration of how struggling to achieve ideal masculinity causes more problems for black men then it solves. Relatively, the BMP puts forward new way(s) of constructing and redefining masculinity: decolonizing heterosexuality and the recuperation of Afrocentric concepts. Michael Awkward's "A Black Man's Place(s) in Black Feminist Criticism" offers feminism as a "fruitful, potentially non-oppressive means of reconceptualizing black masculinity" (21). Feminism, however, has its own problems with masculinity as it struggles to be recognized as an individual construct. Also, if even some black women have problems with feminism, black men who reconstruct their masculinity through its lens will only be placing themselves into another frame of identity that is not their own.

Black Looks, by bell hooks, provides a more appropriate framework for reconstructing black masculinity. Because ideal masculinity fails black men, hooks calls for black men, and black people in general, to "break with hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block their capacity to see [themselves] oppositionally, to imagine, describe,

and invent [themselves] in ways that are liberatory" (2). Thus, in order for black men to begin to reconstruct a more representative masculine identity, they need to remove the lens of white hegemony and reconstruct this identity into more diverse versions that they can control. This diversity creates a new black male specularity, that in turn increases social mobility, because the black male identity is no longer a monolithic construct. This act is difficult because black masculinity is a subjectivity that is organized within the structures of control and authority (Chapman and Rutherford 1). Consequently, black men are simultaneously constructing and not constructing their masculinity.

Unlike the above critics who call for a reorganization of ideal masculinity, Nai'im Akbar presents a new "vision" of black men. This vision is conceived within an Afrocentric context. Basically, Akbar calls for black men to recuperate African concepts of masculinity that were lost and destroyed by slavery. However, Akbar's vision is difficult to achieve because there is no single definition/moment of recognition of manhood or a clear-cut and universal rite of passage in American society, except heterosexuality. Also race complicates any attempt to develop a rite of passage for black men. Positioning heterosexuality as the authorizer of masculinity locks black men into a fixed male identity that needs to be deconstructed.

Heterosexuality as the dominant structure of control and authority for masculinity remains somehow uncontested. Rutherford's "Who's That Man" posits that heterosexual men have inherited a language that readily defines the lives and sexualities of others but fails when helping these men deal with their own masculine identities (22). The BMP utilizes Chapman and Rutherford's analysis of power to remove heterosexual masculinity from the "natural" hierarchy and slowly expose it for what it is: a construct that makes other masculine constructs inferior. Such exposure allows black men to untangle themselves from the web of hegemonic masculinity that is white heterosexuality. The BMP explores hysteria and homophobia to reveal how hegemonic masculinity characterizes anything feminine as weak, and how homosexuality becomes problematic for black men who do not posses feminine attributes. Femininity and homosexuality are both examples of constructions defined through hegemonic masculinity. Arthur Saint-Aubin's "Testeria: The Dis-ease of Black Men in White Supremacist, Patriarchal Culture" recuperates the notion of hysteria, as a male symptom, by divesting it of its female origins in order to reconnect it to the black male body (1055). As a result, Fanon's notion of alienation resurfaces, as black men's sexual identities are restricted to heterosexuality.

Though sexuality plays an important role in the construction of black masculinity, the black male identity becomes even more complex when one examines the unfair treatment of black men in the justice system through practices such as police profiling and unfair sentencing. Such treatment causes black men to mistrust the justice system, perceiving it as maintaining a double standard when upholding and administering justice. One only needs to look at alarming prison statistics to see this standard. According to the Justice Policy Institute, there are more young black men in prison than in college. In 1980, there were 463,700 black men in university, three times as many as the 143,000 in custody. By 2004 there were 791,600 black men behind bars and only 603,032 enrolled in higher education, the institute reports.

Obviously, imprisonment limits black men's physical mobility; however, the scarlet label of criminality affects their social mobility, even if it's a first offense. Both Patricia J. Williams' "Meditations on Masculinity," and George M. Fredrickson's "The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny," support hooks' and Black's argument that white models of masculinity will not provide the same benefits to black men as they do white men. Both Williams and Fredrickson argue that white masculinity becomes a conceptual cloak that makes any white criminal anomalous in relation

to the mass of decent white citizens (12), but any black criminal becomes all black men, and the fear of all black men becomes the rallying point for controlling all black people.

This inverted conceptual cloak, William and Fredrickson posit, stigmatizes black males by constructing them collectively as criminal, violent, lascivious, and irresponsible. The BMP reveals that these stigmas are refined by certain representations of black men. Stories, films, editorials and other social media provide images that enable society to subordinate and marginalize black men. Here, Williams, Fredrickson, and hooks employ Wallace's notion of black male specularity in society. Collectively these critics' analyses imply that counter-images are insufficient for dispelling negative images of black males because positive images are usually dismissed as humorless, political, or extreme, and must contend with a set of "agreed upon truths and presuppositions" about black men (Delagado and Stefancic 212). These truths and presuppositions create an existential paranoia that positions black men "between limiting historical archetypes" (Preston 16). This research is intriguing because it looks at the available black male characters presented in the national narrative: the shadow lurking in the corner, the hulking athlete, and the exotic singer and dancer. These characters set social and economic limits on black men and black people in general. The BMP exposes these false

archetypes as problematic identities impeding social and economic mobility.

The existential paranoia that Rohan Preston identifies feeds tension between black men and the police. Interestingly, R.M. Johnson analyzes media crime coverage and illustrates that black crimes are dramatized disproportionately to white ones, presenting black males as habitual criminals. When you have two entities that mistrust one another, each side forms ways of dealing with the other: the police resort to extensive profiling and brutality; black men resort to insubordination and following the codes of the street. Christopher Cooper's "Mediation in Black and White: Unequal Distribution of Empowerment by Police" clarifies the mistrust analogy. Because black men are viewed as habitual criminals, police fail to empower them compared to whites when settling disputes. Cooper maintains that when whites are involved in interpersonal disputes that prompt police attention, overwhelmingly police officers empower the disputants to help themselves or mediate for them (126). By offering black men no such option, police create the idea of a legal double standard.

Like Cooper, Brian Gilmore's "Twisted Street Logic" examines the double standard that exists in mandatory minimum sentencing laws. These laws are an insidious form of racism that has survived the changing times in America. Gilmore uncovers how American

jurisprudence has effectively used mandatory sentencing laws to incarcerate thousands of black men for extended periods for nonviolent drug offenses and other crimes. As Ellis Cose suggests, serving time becomes a rite of passage for many black men (105). The BMP describes how the justice system and extended prison time further impedes black males' ability to construct a positive masculine identity.

Further relating the tension between black men and the police, R.M. Johnson reveals that black men from childhood to adulthood become fearful of the blue uniform and are reluctant to request assistance from the law (12). Fear of the blue uniform is especially prevalent in black male street culture. In "What I Learned in School," Mat Johnson's exploration of street culture shows how aggressiveness rules, and violence becomes key to power and identity. Thus black men who are a part of the street culture do not have the necessary/requisite tools to navigate societal tensions and boundaries, and they do not trust society's ability to see them clearly without all the social connotations that accompany their ethnicity. More importantly, the BMP explains how these males form their own tools—borrowed from the trickster and bad-man figure—of resistance, deception, and adaptation to navigate through society and acquire and maintain a masculine identity.

Synthesizing the Trickster/Bad-man Figure(s)

The trickster figure encapsulates the issue of black male representation and masculinity discussed above. Crafty, witty, high-spirited and as old as human culture itself, tricksters are masters of disguise and consummate survivors, skillfully outmaneuvering their foes with guile, and charm (White-Parks 4). African American trickster tales, derived largely from West African antecedents, flourished during slavery and reconstruction and can be traced throughout African American culture/literature, serving multiple roles and having both negative and positive consequences that reflect on African-Americans today, specifically black men. The trickster/ bad-man figure is a primary trope used by the BMP to explore the dichotomy it reinforces. While the trickster primarily developed as a survival strategy, during slavery it still manifests itself in the performance of black masculinity. As a result, black men find themselves in a web of confusion because trickster characteristics simultaneously aid and impede black men's social and economic movement.

Borrowing selectively from the trickster traditions of Africa (where tricksters took on human, divine, or animal form), African Americans particularly valued tales involving animal trickster figures. Fearing reprisal if they freely conveyed their own human grievances, slaves told tales that employed animal characters; the animals represented

specific human actions and generalized patterns of human behavior. According to Lawrence Levine, in his study *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, "the primary trickster figures of animal tales were weak, relatively powerless creatures that attain[ed] their ends through the application of native wit and guile rather than power or authority." (12) The ultimate goal of the trickster was to subvert the corrupt and divisive moral conventions and the established order that originally enforced those morals.

The best-known African American trickster figure was Brer Rabbit, who embodied idealized human qualities valued by socially restrained African Americans (slaves). With didactic as well as figurative dimensions, Brer Rabbit and similar tales offered slaves both positive and negative examples of human behavior, which ultimately helped them better understand their world. Though the tales are humorous, they demonstrate the power of intellect, a power that slaves recognized they needed in order to free themselves from the mental and physical chains of slavery. The BMP relies upon the various forms freedom takes in these tales and connects these variations to the formation of black masculine identity. The ownership of materials that represent wealth and status is one freedom of movement that the BMP maps.

African American trickster tales, while preserving the humor and vitality of African tales, added weapons of subversive masking and gave the trickster signifying skills, which helped the slaves to meet the conditions of slavery. For example, the slave narratives of Henry "Box" Brown, and Henry and Ellen Craft both use trickster motifs, especially deception, to facilitate escape from bondage. Today's black males continue to use this tradition in their performance and maintenance of masculinity. The humorous trickster, who presented himself in the Brer Rabbit tales, was present throughout slavery, as evident in the narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. Jacobs recounts an incident in which she happens to meet another slave, Luke, who tricked the relatives of his dead master into giving him trousers that he had filled with the master's money. This example may cause one to question the ethics of the trickster; his reputation as a dissembling swindler has led to a stereotyped view of him as a selfish, unprincipled fraud. Yet the trickster's easy manipulation of appearances also insures his survival. When a man has his wages stolen from him year after year, and the laws sanction and enforce the theft, he cannot be expected to have more regard for honesty than the man who robs him. As a trickster, Luke was able to survive and deal with the laws of society during his time. Maintaining any sort of cultural identity under slavery demanded an acceptance of a covert

resistance to the dehumanizing racial myths of slavery, a tactic at which the trickster excels (Levine 14). Likewise, one understands that maintaining a black masculine identity still requires resistance under a construed political narrative. In African American life, the trickster emerges not simply as a greedy, amoral clown but also as a folk hero whose subversive behavior helps to upset an unequal balance of power (Roberts 12). When placed within the context of contemporary American life, the trickster's challenge to established order represents a revolutionary stance against oppression.

One such resistance figure was High John De Conquer. According to Zora Neale Hurston, John was a powerful mystical figure that came from Africa with the slaves. Through his strength and humor, he gave the slaves hope until freedom came. Hurston states,

> High John de Conquer came to be a man, a mighty man at that. But he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper put on flesh. His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a singing-drum. Black people had an irresistible impulse to laugh. High John de Conquer was a man in full, and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks knew him in the flesh.

As the "great human culture hero in Negro folk-lore" and "the wish-fulfillment hero of the race," John symbolizes the capacity of Black people to resist, endure and prevail with our humanity intact" (Byrd 3). Byrd states that Hurston's John "is a poetic distillation of the

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principal attributes of John celebrated in the tales in which he emerges as a redemptive and transgressive figure" (4).

The O.J. Simpson trial is an example of challenging order. Many were shocked at some African-Americans' pleasure when O.J. was found not guilty. Much of this pleasure, however, had to do with the ability of a black man to beat the system, regardless of his presumed guilt or innocence, especially since a white female was involved. O.J. functions within the BMP as a trickster, for his ability to outwit "the master."

With the veil of physical slavery gone, black men would need a stronger image to define their masculinity. So the trickster, who performed his tactics in the dark or in secrecy because of the institution of slavery, becomes the bad-man figure who retains elements of trickery but employs an obvious physical and more visual prowess. The bad-man figure emerged during the years following Reconstruction and gained wide recognition, especially in the Deep South, during the last decade of the nineteenth century (Roberts 13). The trickster figure of slave days could not have survived in its current form; therefore, African Americans combined traits of the trickster and the conjuring figures to create the bad man, "a figure whose acts of lawlessness, particularly gambling, secured some of the benefits that

the white social order systematically denied African Americans" (Roberts 14).

Often based on the experiences of real men such as Morris Slater, an Alabama Turpetine worker who killed a policeman and escaped arrest by jumping a freight train, the bad man was characterized in toasts, songs, and ballads "by his propensity for gambling, violence, and other acts of lawlessness; by his strength and virility; and by his purely self-interested antagonism toward both the dominant white social order and the oppressed African American" (16). The ideal participant in the life of the toast/ballad "is neither totally trickster or bad-man but a synthesis of two, favoring cleverness, toughness, and [sexual prowess] (Wepman, Newman, and Binderman 214). However, the bad-man does dominate through the visual image of toughness, overt trickery, and the use of degrading language. There are many characteristics that make up the toasts and ballads that the bad-man perform. The actors in these performance narratives are heroes and fools, tricksters and prostitutes, and pimps and hustlers who face some of the same threats and problems of the listener (B. Jackson 123). However, unlike most of the listeners "the narratives' protagonists deal with these difficulties with style and grace, and when they fail their failures are spectacular" (Jackson 123). Other ballads concern valuable properties that the heroes lose; still others cause

losses incurred deliberately by denunciation, trickery or desertion (Wepman, Newman, and Binderman 213). Some toast/ballads are fused with sexual relations involving women. These relations "are in variably affectionless and usually affectless; the female exists as a device for exercise and articulation of male options, not as an integral member of a bilateral relationship" (Jackson 129). The ideal is not to coerce the female into having sex, but it is with the potential of the sexual act that one "negotiates, executes, and/or terminates the conquest" (129).

Of the many bad-men who became legendary in African American folklore, Stackolee, John Hardy, and Railroad Bill (a figure based on the exploits of Morris Slater) are perhaps the most widely recognized. Folklorists have argued that Stackolee and other bad black men in folk tradition owe their appeal to the African American public's awe for men who disdain all conventions (Levine 12). So long victimized by the institution of slavery and the second-class citizenship that followed, many African American men developed an attraction for bad men stories.

During the Black Aesthetic/Arts Movement in the early 1960's to mid-70s, bad-man tropes found a supportive environment as the African American Community was creating new definitions of blackness in terms of food, language, image and other cultural norms. The bad-

man was welcomed with open arms, and his physical and sexual image took hold in the heart of the black power movement. Particularly, the Black Panther Party only accepted men who possessed and performed a masculine and heterosexual presence. So not only did the Black Aesthetic Movement "demonstrate the political benefits of ethnicity," it created an environment for a more definitive—though problematic—black masculinity (Lowe 447).

These bad-man images are clearly recognized in ballads/toasts like "*Shine* and the Titanic." The character Shine epitomizes the extension of trickster qualities into the bad-man figure. In the version recorded as spoken in Philadelphia and published in Roger Abraham's *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1964), Shine, a black stoker on the sinking ship, dives over board and swims hundreds, even thousands of miles to New York, leaving the captain, his daughter, and his wife to die.   The captain offers to pay Shine because he thinks money will always buy a black man. Shine refuses. The pregnant daughter offers him sex, but again Shine refuses because of her condition. The wife also offers sex, and Shine refuses again but in a peculiar way. She says, " save me, and I will let you eat pussy like a rat eats cheese." Liking the offer but not the metaphor, Shine replies, "I like pussy, [but] I ain't no rat," so as to maintain his sexual prowess while rejecting the insult. Thus

Shine becomes the ultimate trickster/bad-man of physical strength, sexual prowess, and intellect, ready to perform black masculinity.

The new physical image of the bad-man becomes solidified in the films of the 1970's. Most obviously, a host of movies that star Rudy Ray Moore as Dolemite—which include *Dolemite*, *Human Tornado*, and *Monkey Hustle*—and the movie *Shaft*, which stars Richard Roundtree, evidence the bad-man's physical and sexual prowess. "Realizing the need to carve out his own niche from other black comedians of that period--namely Redd Foxx--Moore took a much more shocking approach to his comedy by filling his material with profanity, sex, and several traditional toasts ("Shine and the Great Titanic", "The Signifying Money," and of course "Dolemite"), making him the world's first X-rated comedian" (Murray). In most of his earlier films, Dolemite is an outlaw, a lady's man, and uses harsh profanity, especially during sexual scenes. Though Moore had wide acceptance for his films, many were offended, especially middle class and upper class blacks; also the films were not able to attract enough white viewers. However, the movie *Shaft* would accomplish the latter with ease.   Shaft possesses some of the qualities of Dolemite -- he is a lady's man, has physical prowess, but also has more class and the style of a "dandy or pimp," and he "has the added component of detective and multiculturalist" (McCollum).

Throughout the movie *Shaft*, the lead character is built up to be a black superman. He refuses to give into the expectations of a largely racist white society that he be a criminal and that he bow to the will of authority (McCollum). Shaft is black and commands the respect of the black community. That respect is gained through his ability to survive without subjugating himself to the white authority figures, as the old trickster figure did during slavery. However, he still acts criminally to solve crimes. Shaft is a black character who is not a street criminal but a detective who often breaks the law. His occupation is the only thing that separates him from other criminals. The criminal flaw disrupts a potentially positive black male character. This is an example of the politicization of the black male body in media. One should not expect all black male portrayals to be perfect, but they all should not be extreme either. Black males in media are either destined criminals or elevated criminals because of how they have been placed in films. Black and proud of it, Shaft lacks the militant " chip on his shoulder Dolemite had and is free from the confines of race; he neither bows to nor wants to subvert white society" (McCollum). Thus, Shaft is not positioned to assimilate the norms of the hegemonic institution he works for, nor does he want to overthrow it. It is understood that Shaft goes and comes as he pleases. With the development of electronic media, the Shaft character was glorified and continues to be

a constant fixture in media along with more militant black male behavior while active participation in black folk culture has declined (Henry 477).

Though the role and persona that Shaft took on were not negatively racist, they were stereotypical and would become more so in the 1990s when a wave of black films with younger and more militant black male images would emerge. Two such films are *Boyz 'N the Hood* (1991), perhaps the first of the so-called "hood" films, and *Menace II Society.* Though these films point to the reality of race and class as lived categories rather than social constructions and counter-pose traditionalist notions of race and racial politics with nihilistic ones, they sent the message to some black youth that the gangster image was cool. As a result, whites and some blacks argued that young black men who perform this image should be treated with great caution. This is one of the negative fallouts the bad-man left behind.

The trickster/bad-man's "historical roots in social and political engagement, together with his fluidity of form and transgression of boundaries, make him a compelling figure not only for cultural resistance and survival" (Roberts 23), but also for bringing a clearer understanding of stereotypes of black males. Because this figure cannot be pinned down to any one form, shape or position, and because he continually disrupts the status quo with laughter, outrage,

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rebellion, intellect, physical and sexual prowess, he acts both as a figure of cultural strength and cultural destruction as young black men shift from the mythic to the real. Today, the bad-man image remains a survival strategy in America. The struggle for a masculine identity begins as black men use tropes of the bad-man to demonstrate and shape their masculinity (badness, style) at the expense of losing social and economic mobility and ill informing their national narrative: the way in which black males are perceived by other groups. The BMP shows how black men, in their current attempts to form a masculine identity, borrow resistance, deception, adaptation, and physical and sexual prowess from the trickster/bad-man figure.

Building the BMP—Points of Analysis

Current criticism clearly exposes the complexities of race and masculinity but fails to create a cohesive framework for analyzing the various aspects of black masculine identity. Through the Black Masculine Paradigm, I provide a critical lens for reading black masculinity. Basically, the BMP extricates, from autobiography and film three pivotal moments in the construction of black male identity: (1) politicization of place and space in society, (2) the maintenance of a prescribed masculine identity, and (3) freedom of physical, social, and economic movement. I use this to expose racism's disruption of black masculinity. In addition to chapter one, which introduces and defines

the BMP, this project consists of four chapters that explicate the paradigm's design, and one which discusses the benefits of a unified paradigm for reading black male identity.

Chapter two, "The Politicized Black Male Consciousness," presents specific aspects of Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* in terms of the BMP. Through these texts, I examine autobiography as a genre specifically revealing the evolution of black men's struggle to claim masculinity. All of these narratives at critical historical moments reveal how racism has historically forced black men to exist within a particular place and space that is usually negative and limited. Using hooks, Fanon, Hutchinson, and Hoch, I argue that black men internalize this racism, affecting social alienation (Fanon, Gates) which leads to a masculine identity that is reactionary and oppositional rather than secure and empowering. This dynamic is contexualized by a defined tension between assimilating society's norms and by progressing toward what Naim Akbar calls a "vision" of black masculine identity that better aids black male survival.

Exploring how the tension created by social alienation manifests in black male performance of masculinity, chapter three, "Prescriptions for Black Masculinity: Let's Get Crunk," reads the trickster as an

implied trope through which black men navigate societal expectations and their envisioned masculinity. Building on the notion that gaining and winning the respect of peers requires one to perform masculinity— i.e, being hip, wearing the right clothes, developing the proper strut technique, a smart mouth fused with vulgar language, and an air of hardness with fist-fighting skills to back it up— I continue to explore Douglass, Wright, Brown, and McCall. Also through an analysis of the films *Boyz in the Hood* and *Menace II Society*, I use Alexander, Lubiano, and Michelle Wallace, among others, to posit that male representations as authorized by black male actors become ingrained in both the white and black psyches. These performed fictions reinforce existing notions that certain ways of acting or behaving are indeed black and masculine, creating a monolithic and politically problematic male identities that restricts black men to particular social spheres.

The persistence of the struggle outlined in chapter two and the power of the restrictions discussed in chapter three converge in chapter four "My Nigga' My Brutha' My Luva'—Black Male Bonding." This chapter examines the role of heterosexuality as a specific prescription for black masculine performance. Again I select specific moments from Wright, Brown, and McCall where black males function as examples political bodies that must perform masculinity at all

times. The competing masculinities in these works highlight the internal struggle of many young black males. Furthermore, this chapter uses James Hardy's B-Boy Blues to inquire into and critique hyper-masculinity and explore the social compulsions that implicitly authorize heterosexuality as the only appropriate masculinity. Using Hardy's novel, I examine how black gay men battle for a masculine identity against the feminization of homosexuality and compulsory heterosexuality. Like Chapman and Rutherford, I argue that femininity and homosexuality are both examples of constructs defined through masculinity. I use these texts to demonstrate a resurfacing of alienation as black men negotiate between their self-definition and social demands for heterosexuality.

Chapter 2: The Politicized Black Male Consciousness

This chapter analyzes the autobiographical novels of Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Claude Brown, and Nathan McCall to trace and position historically how the black male consciousness is politicized due to racism. Here I define politicization as the process through which black skin, as a result of continuous historical and contemporary perpetuation of degrading stereotypes, is positioned as inferior by a hegemonic society. Throughout this project politicization means the distortion of the image and representation of blackness, rather than an indoctrinating process. At the core of this racism is a process that Maurice Wallace refers to as spectragraphia. Into this term, he

> collapses the racialist representations of black men and a somewhat greater family of signifiers that share etymological roots in the Latin *specere* : *specimen, speculum, specious, suspect*—all signifiers of an optically inflected framing of black men within the rigid repertoire of each term's disreputable and diminishing significations (31).

In other words, through the lens of the dominant society skin color is controlled and defined through stereotypical impressions. But unlike film in a camera, these impressions are not blank but coded with racism to collapse blackness, creating a corrupt gaze of black men. Spectragraphia affects black men's place/status and space/environment in society whenever a white presence dominates

social environments that black males come into contact with: teachers, policemen, landlords, or storeowners. Each of the novels I discuss situates along a historical continuum beginning with Douglass's slave narrative and progressing through Wright's autobiography around world World War II, Brown's Civil Rights Movement era novel and McCall's late 20th century narrative. Collectively, these texts demonstrate the peculiar forces that historically contribute to force black males into creating a concept of masculinity that while empowering is often problematic. Each of the texts demonstrates how racism creates social alienation and internalization that forces the protagonist to create a space and place for his own concept of masculinity to avoid participating in corrupt dominate society.

The politicization process begins with slavery, as Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* firmly establishes. To understand the complex roots of racism in America, one must realize that slavery did not begin with the coming of Europeans to the Americas. Its history reaches back to ancient times. It was prevalent in Europe until replaced by serfdom in the Middle Ages, and it continued to exist long after that in parts of Asia and Africa. But for the most part, those slaves were prisoners of war or persons convicted of major crimes. The general attitude was that they were unfortunate, but no widely accepted idea existed connecting the condition of slavery with ethnic, racial, or individual

inferiority. Slaves once freed disappeared into the society of those old world cultures. Why did this not happen in the Americas? Why was slavery's impact on the personalities of blacks and whites in the United States so severe and long lasting? Why did slavery become what historians have called "the peculiar institution?

Slavery in the English North American colonies came about because of the great need on the part of the colonists, once their settlements were established, for labor. There were never enough new colonists or indentured servants arriving, and the availability of free land meant that free men sought their own property and were difficult to keep as laborers. In 1619 when some of the first slaves arrived in the English Colonies they were sold as indentured servants, and as such, were able to obtain their freedom after working out their indenture. But beginning in the 1640s most Africans who arrived in the colonies had no indenture and therefore could not look forward, ever, to receiving their freedom. Clearly the "freedom-loving" colonist—who had at first regarded Africans as merely different and not inferior—needed to rationalize this act of holding men in bondage permanently; had to adopt a philosophy and attitude that would allow them to live with a slave system which existed in all colonies but which proved most profitable in the plantation economy of the South. The

philosophy was that black slaves were not human beings and thus not entitled to the considerations due humans.

Slaves were brought out of Africa in increasingly large numbers. Many died resisting capture, or traveling to the slave factories that lined the African coast, or in the crowed ships that transported them to the New World. Horrors of the crossing and the experiences among hostile people had a major effect on the men, women, and children brought to the Americas. The *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* is very telling of this experience. He writes:

> I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I was sound, by some of the crew; and I was no persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their compelsions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had very heard, united to confirm me in this belief… . When I looked around the ship too, and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people, of every description, chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate… . I asked… if we were not be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair… .
> I was soon put down under the decks, and their I receive such a salutation to my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and with my crying together, I became so sick and low that was not able to eat. Two of the with men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.
> The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, being so crowded that

each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This deplorable situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily, perhaps, for myself, I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost continually on deck; and from my extreme youth, I was not put in fetters (134).

The large percentage of the slaves in the Southern population of North America is often used to explain the fear of a slave uprising, the consequent of harshness of the system, and the hatred of blacks which developed from these. It is generally acknowledged that rationalizing whites hated blacks because they mistreated them—and needed an excuse for doing so—rather than they mistreated them because they hated them. As the system became harsher the need on the part of slaveholders to justify it became greater—as did the difficult of so logically. Stanely Elkins writes of the South's philosophical contortions:

> ….[The] body of thought was governed by the fact that South was talking no longer to the world, or even to the North, but to itself. It is this fact—that fact of internal consensus, and the peculiar lack of true challenge-points at any level of Southern society—that gives the proslavery polemic its special distinction…. The mind could now conceive the enemy in any size or shape it shoes; specters were utterly free to range, thrive, and proliferate.
>
> Only in such a setting of nightmare does it seem plausible, for example, that one of the most non-intellectual of paradoxes should have developed in men's writing and talk regarding the Negro slave and his present and hypothetical behavior. On the other hand, the ideal picture of Southern life was one of contentment, of plantations teeming with faithful and happy black children—young and old—helpless, purposeless children incapable of sustained and unsupervised initiative. On the

other hand was the picture of doom; the hint of freedom, whispered by designing abolitionists would galvanize the sleeping monster in every slave, arouse bloody revolt, and bring hordes of black primitives bent on murder and destruction (87).

Southerners, while often irrational in their fears, could cite the slave revolts that did take place as evidence that their fears were well founded. Gabriel, a blacksmith who lived outside Richmond, Va., led a revolt in 1800; Denmark Vessey was the leading spirit in the 1822 plot at Charleston, S.C.; and Nat Turner struck fear into the hearts of all slaveholders in 1831 when he led an uprising in Virginia that took the lives of 60 whites and fought a pitched battle with state and federal troops before being crushed.

However, the number of blacks and the fear of insurrections fail to explain fully the lasting influence of slavery on institutional life. Major slave revolts in ancient Rome seem to not have had such effects. So for an explanation of U.S. racism one must dig deeper into the American character—strangely enough, into those experiences, ideas, and institutions which Americans set forth as their brightest contributions: for the paradox is that the peculiar institution of American slavery developed side-by-side with institutions which spoke of the dignity of man, government with the consent of the governed, majority rule, and protection of the rights of the individual. Indeed, it may have been because these ideals and institutions were so strongly

held and respected that strong feelings had to be marshaled against those persons who were not allowed to share them.

At the core of these institutions that grew along side slavery was power and control, which was to be kept from the slave at all cost. This repression caused what Orlando Patterson calls in his comparative analysis a social death. He writes:

> because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master he became a social non-person. ...He had a past, past is not a heritage. ...Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lies, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory (5).

This power and control was also enforced and strengthened through what Patterson terms as "natal alienation."   One of the most prominent slave narrative conventions is the lack of knowledge concerning one's pre and post heritage. "It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of blood, and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master" (7).

For the most part slaves belonged to no community, except for the ones they created among themselves which had little meaning; therefore, they had no social existence outside of his master. Thus,

they were socially dead. This social death took place through the ritual of enslavement that incorporated one or more of four basic features:

> "first, the symbolic rejection by the slave of his past and his former kinsmen; second, a change of name; third, the imposition of some visible mark of servitude; and last, the assumption of a new status in the household or economic organization of the master" (52).

All these developments may be found in the slave narrative. The assertions by many critics that the slave narrative begins the African-American literary tradition are repeated so often that they have acquired the force of self-evident truth. Charles Davis makes the argument up front in titling one of his important essays: "The Slave Narrative: First Major Art Form in an Emerging Black Tradition." James Olney more strongly makes the same conclusion in stating "the undeniable fact is that the Afro-American literary tradition takes its start in theme certainly, but also in content and form from the slave narrative" (168). Making an even bolder assertion, H. Bruce Franklin argues that the slave narrative was the "first genre the United States of American Contributed to the written literature of the world" (27). According to Deborah McDowell, Douglass's narrative in particular has been useful and usable to scholars whose approaches "run the gamut from a now-devalued liberal humanism to a currently more valorized post structuralism" (193).

Of particular interest concerning Douglass's narrative is its function as an autobiography of both identity and historical art. As an autobiography, the narrative occupies the territory between history and art, biography and fiction, memory and imagination, which in turn culminates into identity. Identity, through history and art, according to Albert Stone, is itself the container of meaning to Douglass's narrative (194). The recovered past, the journey black, represented in the work is a spare existence characterized by brutality and uncertainty (Houston Baker 29). However, Gates suggest that the narrative is a "countergenre, a mediation between the novel of sentiment and the picaresque, oscillating between the two in a bipolar moment, set in motion by the mode of the confession, which spawned its formal negation the plantation novel" (80). So this writing structure has become a recurring narrative technique in African American literature in general, "a structure in which the writer and his subject merge into the stream of language" (Gates 84)

The most infamous phrase of Douglass's narrative "you have seen how a man was made a slave, you shall see how a slave was made a man" captures the studious focus on making a slave a man according to the cultural norms of masculinity. As a result of such focus, Douglass has become a mythological figure. As Valerie Smith observes, "by mythologizing rugged individuality, physical strength,

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and geographical mobility, the slave narrative enshrines cultural definitions of masculinity" (34). She further adds that "the plot the standard narrative may thus be seen as not only the journey from slavery to freedom but also the journey from slave hood to manhood" in cultural terms (34).

We need to focus on the lack of knowledge the slaves possessed and physical abuse, which socially reduced them to an inferior "other." Enslavement, according to George Cunningham, is "the moment of captivity of the body marked first by material displacement and deferrals that recreate themselves as discursive sights of captivity" (137). The captive black body is positioned "to be bid upon in a circuit of linguistic, discursive, and axiological exchange outside the control of its own agency" (137). Thus, slavery controlled the environment and status of slaves, which drastically limited and politicized the slave consciousness by making slaves view themselves as inferior. Sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans believed that bondage was the natural and proper condition for Africans and that they were morally and mentally inferior, therefore best suited for slavery. Europeans positioned themselves as indispensable saviors of a people who were unable to save themselves.

Physical restraint and abuse were the first weapons used to inferorize slaves. Before arriving to the North American continent,

Blacks and blackness had already been given the impression of evil, uncivilized and less than human. When slaves first emerged from slave ships in 1619, this impression was further influenced by the chains and filthiness that they suffered during the middle passage. Although slaves learned to communicate among themselves, they still lacked personal knowledge that creates one's sense of being and understanding of the outside world. The naming of the slave by the slave master further "disempowers and unman black male slaves" (Gibson 95). The slave's original name was more than a way of calling him: "It was a verbal signal of his whole identity, his being-in-the-world as a distinct person, and it establishes and advertises his relation with kinsmen" (Patterson 55).

The lack of knowledge is one way in which slaves become politicized, particularly the lack of knowledge of parentage. Douglass explains he knew so little of his mother, that when she died "he received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions [he would probably] have felt at the death of a stranger" (Douglass 49). Douglass also has no clue as to who his father is, except that he is probably a white man. Here, according to Wallace, is the "troubled discovery of social meaninglessness: [Douglass's] first awareness of self-as-cipher is caught inconsequentially between black and white, male and man, biology and psychology" (85). Without strong family

ties, slaves often felt alienated and the institution of slavery itself took the place of family. "Interwoven into this [replacement] is the economic relationships of African American males [limited] and distinct set of social experiences because their economic roles during slavery was inextricably linked to a limited range of social roles that were able to support, coexist with or survive degradation" (Booker viii). Douglass rescues the possibilities of his origin from the master's appropriations in order to gain social meaning (Cunningham 137).

Literacy was also withheld from slaves, leaving them unaware of the environment beyond slavery. Such knowledge was important if slaves were to gain a sense of worth and come to some reconciliation with the binaries Wallace locates. When Douglass learns to read, he understands "what has been to him a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man" (78). This is key because in order to function as an independent mind in another cultural world one must understand their language and the conventions. When Douglass reads *The Columbian Orator*, he learns the power of reasoning, which allows him to recognize that slavery was not a pre-ordained institution for blacks. He also so sees that other people have suffered oppression and fought it. Once he learns the power of reasoning, like many slaves, he has the tools to set his

mind free, and once the mind is free, more logical ways become apparent to make the body free.

Though this mental awareness gives Douglass a new sense of place and space, physical abuse becomes the control mechanism for slaves who tried to overcome politicization. Slave masters often gave senseless beatings and work assignments in order to maintain control over the body of slaves. Douglass conveys this best in the following statement during his stay with Covey:

> Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and sprit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute (110)!

This transformation from a man into a brute is very telling of how the politicization process devastated the black consciousness. The spirit of self recognition that Douglass eventually achieved came from a mixture of intellect and anger: intellect because he is aware that the world held a place for him and other blacks beyond slavery, and anger because his status and environment offers very little hope in changing his condition. Slavery acts as a psychological capsule that only literacy can penetrate. Douglass would never recognize that the battle with Covey is a turning point in his career as a slave if he had not been able to break through this capsule with knowledge. He understands that however long he might remain a slave in form after this battle, the day

had passed forever when he could be a slave [psychologically] in fact (113).

Despite moments of self-recognition like this among black male slaves, the Reconstruction period restricted them in other ways and emancipation left them without space or status, only a veiled sense of freedom.

Reconstruction was originally designed to equalize the discrepancies between African Americans and whites and to give formerly enslaved people access to American Democracy. Federally imposed policies implemented at this time, ordered that African Americans be allowed to own land; have access to better jobs, and education, and generally claim their places in American society. With federal agitation for the rights of blacks and the presence of troops on Southern soil to enforce those rights, some Blacks succeeded in changing their status in positive ways. The struggle to find a voice and consciousness was tied to the larger struggle of Blacks to secure recognition as citizens. Black activists had to be ever vigilant in an environment where forces were constantly at work to return them to slavery. After the Civil War, however, southern governments reenacted black codes in reaction to the federal government's active intervention in their affairs and to further oppress blacks.   The Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in 1868, granted Blacks citizenship,

but the reality of that condition was not soon forthcoming. This left a large number of black people physically dislocated. Black men in particular were anxious to determine what their roles in the new society would be and what allies they would have as they assumed those roles, especially in becoming socially men.

After Douglass's narrative, almost one-hundred years passed by the time Wright's *Black Boy* is published, but black males and black people in general had not accomplished much. Wright's autobiography begins with his boyhood, which allows the reader to witness the making of a politicized black male consciousness that "hungers" for masculinity and further examines the politicization process as black males attempted to mature, obtain jobs, raise a family, and coexist in America. This politicization occurs because Wright's race, class and gender identity are not the origin of his social status because these identities do not make his social existence empowering, but rather limited.

Indeed, as *Black Boy* demonstrates, Wright's environment becomes further restricted as he grows older. During the time Wright focuses on in the novel, most black males find it difficult to find jobs and almost impossible to raise a family. As a result, many black men abandon their families as Wright's father does early in the novel. To support the family, Wright's mother cooks for a white family. Wright's

encounter with whites causes his own environment to become politicized, especially when he begins to understand the relationship between whites and blacks. Like most children, Wright discovers the secret of racism that separates blacks and whites. While literacy provides an avenue to understanding his politicized existence, Wright's self-awareness shapes most acutely when he learns that a black boy is beaten by a white man for no apparent reason. This is the beginning of Wright's long journey toward understanding the struggles of black masculinity in the midst of white men. He comes to this conclusion at the age of four.

It is when Wright and his mother move in with his grandmother in Jackson, Mississippi that he comes face to face with the nemesis of black males: Jim Crow. Jim Crow informs Wright as to why black and white people never touched each other except in violence. This separation of white and black people in society causes Wright to question his own environment. Hunger is an environmental element that becomes a permanent fixture in his life compared to whites. As a result, anytime there is an abundance of food, as when he's at his aunt's house, he hides some to "keep as a bulwark against any possible attack of hunger" (59). Jim Crow attempts to teach Wright the value of black male life, further shaping the black male consciousness. When his Uncle Hoskins is murdered by white men for

his flourishing liquor business, Wright does not understand why his mother and Aunt do not fight back. The boldness in Wright provokes fear in Wright's mother whom she slaps into silence. She is afraid because Wright is on a sure path to death if he acts on his feelings. At the age of nine, he does not understand that black men had no place or status that allows them to take action against white men. It always seemed to him that whites dictated much of his family's life.

Just like Wright's grandmother, his mother imparts to him the "gems of Jim Crow wisdom" (60). This aids in the politicization of his consciousness to accept an inferior place and space in society. During his boyhood, there is virtually no chance for his mind to develop freely. Everything conspires against his personal freedom because of the consequences of race. Wright's guardians attempt to teach him how to minimize these consequences, even if means losing dignity and respect. He is treated brutally and tyrannically at home in order to prevent his being treated the same way or worse outside the home. He uses the lessons his mother teaches him while working for an optical company by pronouncing his "sirs" distinctly so that the whites know that he knows his place and that he is addressing white men. Thus, the Southern codes of conduct are given to his family by the white power structure to enforce upon him the message for black children that echoes in Agelina Grimke's sentimental social protest

play *Rachel*: black children must never strive to be more than black children; if they do, not only will they suffer a terrible fate, but their family will as well. As Jabari Asim notes in *Black Man Standing*, similar lessons are taught by African American parents today in reference to police profiling and brutality and the tragedies that sometimes result:

> we have provided them [their sons] with a commonsense approach to personal safety that includes avoiding questionable people and staying away from dangerous places. Still they know that we can't keep them safe once they step outside, that in a world where standing in the doorway of one's home is seen as reasonably constituting suspicious behavior, all bets are off" (32).

Wright's lessons, however, do not carry much weight or assurance because of the self-imposed privilege of some whites to accept or reject the lesson, regardless of how well it is learned. He never knows if his "yes sirs" or no sirs" will be good enough to please whites. This is evident when Wright becomes an economic threat while working for an optical company because he wants to learn the trade of the white man and his presumed disrespect for white workers. Racism allows Wright's white coworkers to rewrite the script by blaming Wright for the problems of their insecurities.

Wright's mind becomes so politicized because of racism that he questions his own value. This is evident when he tries to sell his dog, Betsy, to a white family for money to buy food. Upon arriving at the

chosen home, he marvels at how clean, quiet, and orderly the white world is compared to his chaos, but he also recognizes that this white world is not a place or space that he can occupy. This realization makes him feel threatened, and that his black skin incites the white woman to conclude/suggest that he is a "bad nigger boy." At this young age, Wright becomes aware that his narrative as a black man has already been written and that "there existed men against whom he is powerless, men who can violate his life at will" (86). This hostility he feels from whites becomes deeply implanted in his mind and feelings and affects every aspect of his daily environment. Wright becomes fully aware of the power and control whites have over blacks when he realizes that "there is but one place where a black boy who knows no trade can get a job, and that's were the houses and faces are white, and where the trees and hedges are green" (82).

Once politicization is complete, black males bond together as well as whites to follow the racial scripts they are taught. The following passage is very telling of the roles black and white males find themselves in after the instillation of delicate, sensitive controlling mechanisms that instruct their minds and emotions to accept what each race says is taboo about the other:

> We were now large enough for the white boys to fear us
> and both of us, the white boys and the black boys began
> to play our traditional racial roles as though we had been
> born to them, as though it was in our blood, as though we

were being guided by instinct [add politicization]. All the frightful descriptions we had heard about each other, all the violent expressions of hate and hostility that had seeped into us from our surroundings, came now to the surface to guide our actions. The roundhouse was the racial boundary of the neighborhood, and it had been tacitly agreed between the white boys and the black boys that the whites were to keep to the far side of the roundhouse and we blacks were to keep to our side. Whenever we caught a white boy on our side we stoned him; if we strayed to their side, they stoned us (97).

Clearly, society politicizes Wright to believe that his space and place is very limited. It is during these childhood stone games that Wright becomes aware of his limited environment. He recognizes the vast contrast that can be made between his neighborhood and the white neighborhood across the tracks; nothing green ever grows in his "skimpy paved yard" (97). This difference between the yards is symbolic of the life differences between blacks and whites at the time. Whites have more economic opportunity and potential for advancement, which the green grass symbolizes; blacks live in an isolated, dark world enclosed in a white envelope, which the black pavement symbolizes. Even within his own environment, Wright can be threatened despite the passage's false notion that whites would not come into black neighborhoods. During this game, Wright recognizes the privilege whites felt they had to impose on blacks anywhere at any given time, especially on their jobs and in the community. Wright witnesses this first hand during his politicization in the South, which

makes him aware of the possibility of being killed or otherwise injured because of anything he might or might not say or if he inadvertently violates the ethics of living Jim Crow.

Wright relates a disturbing incident that demonstrates the consequences of not using the "gems of Jim Crow." While delivering packages for work, he punctures a tire on his bicycle. White men drive by and offer to take him and the bicycle along by his clutching it with one hand and clinging to the side of the car with the other. The men are drinking and offer him a flask, but he declines, saying, "oh, no!" He is immediately hit between the eyes with an empty whisky bottle and falls backwards from the speeding car into the dust on the road, his feet becoming entangled in the steel spokes of the bicycle. Quietly amused, the men get out of the car and stand over him; the man who hits him asks: "Nigger, ain't yuh learned no better sense'n that yet?.. Ain't yuh learned t' say sir t' a white man yet?" (214) Dazed, with his elbows and legs bleeding, Wright tries to stand up, but the attacker doubles his fist and kicks the bicycle out of the way. Another man asks him with contempt, "Yuh wanna ride t' town now, nigger? Yuh recon yuh know enough to ride now" (214). As they are leaving the scene, they "comfort" him by saying: "Nigger yuh sho better be damn glad it wuz us yuh talked tu' that way" (214).

The behavior of these men is a type of politicization replicated from the condescending attitude and mentality of slave owners. Wright as a black man can not forget the artificial status of race and class nor decline a white man's offer; if he does, he must still thank and respect white men for it. It is this type of politicization that makes Wright grow silent and reserved, as the nature of the world in which he lives becomes plain and undeniable (293). He understands why generations of black parents implant the feeling in their children that there are multiple, dangerous limits involved in blackness. It is this type of politicization that defines Wright as a "non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt that it was not" (229). For Wright, the white men are part of a " a huge elemental design toward which hate is futile" (229).

Sometimes Wright's physical presence in certain environments proves how limited his space and status is. While making deliveries in a white neighborhood late one Saturday, a police car forces him to the curb. Immediately upon getting out of the car, the policemen draw their guns, an automatic reaction to blackness during this time, and ours. Ordering him to keep still, they search his pockets and packages. Finding nothing suspicious or incriminating, one of them tells him: "boy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighborhoods after sundown." Wright introduces this episode with

this remark: "negroes who have lived South know the dread of being caught alone upon the streets in white neighborhoods after the sun has set (215). The politicization of blackness is graphically symbolized: "while white visitors may walk through these neighborhoods unnoticed, the color of a black man's skin makes him suspect , converts him into a defenseless target" (215). Furthermore, Wright suggests that a black man during this time, still regarded as a servant, or an entertainer, may work for white people during the day, but in the evening, and on Saturday night in particular, when white people socialize, and mentally and physically plot among themselves, he does not belong.

Wright finds, however, that even when his services are needed by whites he is a suspect. During an interview, one white woman's "habit had overcome her rationality" and made her ask Wright "Do You Steal?" Here, Wright is "quickly learning the reality—a negro's reality— of the white world" created through the politicization of the black male consciousness. Wright becomes, as Charles Johnson explains, a phenomenology of the black body to the white woman (604). That is, his black skin, "amalgamated into the institutional décor" of Southern society (Wallace 31) presents his spectrality as a social subject rather than a social being that has very limited roles and evokes certain cautions from the perspective of the woman. He is aware of this

politicization but wishes he had made contact with whites earlier in life so that the "tension he felt would become a habitual condition, contained and controlled by reflex" (176). However, to borrow from Cose, Wright cannot embrace the roles he is told constantly to embrace, despite a steady diet of society's contempt, so he rejects the script and endeavors to create his own (3).

By the time Wright becomes a young man, the politicization he faces in the South convinces him that living as "Negro" is cold and hard. He finds himself on a journey to understand "what was it that made the hate of whites of blacks so steady, seemingly so woven into the texture of things" (190). He recalls how nothing about the problems of the Negroes is ever taught in the classrooms at school and wonders why his friends avoided the subject. At this point, Wright fails to realize that black men and black people in general, are not subjects of interest in the white educational system. However, he is very aware that he lives in a country in which the aspirations of black people are limited, marked off; thus he feels he has to go somewhere and do something to redeem his being alive: he has to go North.

As Wright tries to save money to go north, the politicization becomes so extreme that it forces him to consider illegal ways of gaining money because of his limited place and space in society. The consciousness of other black male friends has already been

compromised and they wondered how Wright himself would get ahead. Many other blacks acknowledged to Wright that they steal on their jobs. Wright knows that in the long run it is futile to steal, that it is not an effective way to alter one's relationship to one's environment; however, it is very apparent that there are not many other ways to change his relationship to his environment when most of his money is used to buy food for his family. At first, fear and the lack of immediate opportunity are the only obstacles preventing him from crossing the line because of his "inability to adjust himself to the white world has already shattered a part of the structure of his personality and broken down the inner barriers to crime" (236). The opportunity does present itself while working at a theater in which he double sells tickets. Finally, he is able to venture to the North, the symbol of freedom.

While in the North working in a research lab, Wright himself discovers the damaging effects politicization has on the narratives that black and whites formed about each other:

> All [Blacks] were working daily in a building where scientific history was being made; the light of curiosity was never in their eyes. They were conditioned to their racial "place, " had learned to see only a part of the whites and the white world; and the whites too, had learned to see only a part of the lives of the blacks and their world (363).

Here the product of politicization is revealed: social alienation resulting from the racial roots of America. This is the great human suffering

that Wright and other black males dealt and deal with in addition to probing the cosmic question of black and human existence in a country that does not show them how to live a human life.

Wright's struggle for a new of way living in the North reveals a new but also deadly set of circumstances for the black male consciousness. Similarly, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* historically picks up where Wright's *Black Boy* leaves off, but in regard to the black male consciousness, one enters a new chapter that depicts " a misplaced generation of black men in an extremely complex, confused society searching their dreams, their sorrows, their small and futile rebellions, and their endless battle to establish their own place in America" (7). Where Wright's text reveals the oppressed conditions of living under Jim Crow, Brown moves the reader toward the oppression of the urban landscape. Like Southern Blacks, Urban Blacks become locked in a spiraling world of decay. It is here that this decay creates and I locate the beginnings of black on black crime. *Promised* is about the sons and daughters of sharecroppers who fled to Northern cities where they thought existed unlimited opportunities for prosperity and no color problems. According to Brown, "to them, [the north] was the "promised land" that mammy had been singing about in the cotton fields for many years" (8). However, someone forgot to tell black Southerners that what they were on their way to would become the

ghetto for the next several decades. "The children, particularly black males, of these "disillusioned colored pioneers inherited the total lot of their parents—the disappointments, and the anger with little hope of deliverance" (8). "For where does one run to when he's already in the promised land?" (8)

During this time of the 1940's, black males faced a new generation of politicization in which their environment becomes solidified. Constantly faced with poverty, drugs, violence, crime and prison, they try to scratch out not only an existence, but gain economic and social status, even while engulfed in racism. Though slavery seemed a distant memory and lessons of Jim Crow are no longer taught, the urban black males in *Promised* still find that it is very hard to establish space and status through education and hard work. With the decreased threat of physical abuse from race found in the South and the concentrated numbers of black youth in the city, black males etch out space and status by any means necessary, mostly at the expense of other blacks.

Promised begins with the shooting of Brown while stealing. Early on in the text, one learns that Brown lives in a very poor neighborhood where it is a struggle to just survive day to day. As a result of extreme poverty, some of Brown's friends internalize their confirmation as low-level drug dealers, gang-bangers, and police-

certified demons which makes it easier for them to accept the message that life is meant to be "short and that the only glory they are likely to get is glory won by the following a code of the street" (Cose 11). Brown recounts visiting friends who have very little food. His freedom and his friends' freedom indicate that there is very little parental or communal supervision. This lack of supervision is what leads Brown in and out of detention centers until his early teens. His troubled youth becomes very important to the chapter on prescribed masculinity, in which Brown and other males use black male prescriptions to maintain a masculine status and acquire physical, social, and economic movement.

Most of the politicization for Brown occurs during his early adult years, when he decides to go on the straight and narrow, except for one incident when he accompanies his father to court. It is during this court scene that one recognizes Brown's disgusted of how race affects black people, especially his father, who has previously seemed so powerful in Brown's eyes. The Browns are in court to receive a settlement from a bus accident. Claude is disturbed by his father's behavior; his "yes sirs" and "no sirs "are reminiscent of the southern lessons taught to Wright. Therefore, I read Claude's father as a part of Wright's generation. But Claude sees no need for his father to be so subservient to the lawyer when he speaks to him, especially when the

lawyer is being paid to do a job and they are in court as victims not criminals. But Claude knows it is the same old black and white story "that he and his dad have already been patted on the back" for (94). The respect Claude has for his father as a man dwindles: "And I used to think he was a real bad nigger. I knew now that he was just a head nodder. ... I heard myself saying, "I guess we ain't nothin' or nobody huh, Dad" (94-95). After this, Claude is anxious to return to the detention center to participate in delinquent behavior, "and show people that he could only be fucked over so much" (95).

Brown's parents are politicized to the point that they try to instill goals in Brown and his brother that allow them to survive but not be too aspiring. Brown's father thinks that being a bus boy is a really good job; forty-five dollars a week is a good sum of money. Brown's generation, however, wants more than just to get by . After Brown informs his mother that he is going to quit because it is too hard to work and attend school, his father demonstrates the success of politicization: "boy, you don't need all that education. ...You ought to stop going to school and stop all that dreaming" (280). Here Brown's father recalls Wright's mother and Douglass's master Covey through their teachings of acceptance; now he is teaching his children to succumb. When Brown's brother, Pimp, tells their mother he wants to be an Air Force pilot, she immediately responds by telling him "not to

go wantin' things that ain't for you, just go out there and get you a good job" (280). Brown begins to understand that his parents lived their lives according to the superstitions and fears that they had been taught in the cotton field (280). To them, Paul Robeson is a bad nigger: any black man that steps out of his place trying to pursue dreams that might get him hung is a bad nigger. He does not understand his parents' fear and his parents do not understand his dreams. Brown compares his generation in Harlem to that of the first Africans coming to America, a new negro that nobody understood or was ready for. Brown feels like a misfit in a world he refuses to bow down to. Very often, in an attempt to heal his fragmented consciousness and maintain his dignity, he quits his jobs. Even when he does have a job, money and expensive clothes, he finally realizes that he really doesn't have anything if he doesn't have equality and respect.

This equality and respect is not only something that Brown does not have; it is something that most black folk in Harlem do not have. During his life, Brown witnesses the devastating decay of Harlem caused by drugs, violence, corruption, and racism, despite its status as a black Mecca and cultural reservoir. It is the South all over again; this time, however, blacks are confined to a larger space, a city rather than across the tracks as in Wright's case. But to borrow from Brian

Gilmore, it becomes clear to Brown and McCall that black progress was eroding and "the prospect of obtaining the new skills necessary for survival in a capitalistic society [seemed] virtually nonexistient" (46).

Like Wright, Brown finds that his presence in particular places makes him a suspect. When he moves out of Harlem to Greenwich Village, he moves out of black space. One night while in his room he rents from a white couple, he is confronted by the police. Only the assurance of the white landlord privileges and authorizes Brown to be there. A few days later, a similar incident occurs when a drunken cop confronts him on his way to shave downstairs. With the safety razor in his hand, Brown feels his life is at risk. But once again the landlord's whiteness is the only thing that gives Brown space and status. Politicization causes whiteness to penetrate the very core of black existence, as Brown's friend Alley relates to him in the following passage:

> You come up all this time, [Claude], all your life in Harlem. And there is the white landlord, man, who your folks got to be worried about paying the rent to. There is the white grocer, who your moms got to be going down pleading with….to give her some credit so she could feed her kids. They got to be going and taking their stuff to the pawnshop to some damn white pawnbroker, who they go to beg for a few dollars, because he knows they're up tight and need the money. They got to go to the white butcher, who's going be selling them same old dried-up neck-bones, pig tails and pig feet. Everything is white (328).

It is this mentality that makes it difficult for Brown and other black males to navigate socially in American Society and find other ways to establish place and status.

Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler* ushers in a new era of politicization in which drugs provide black males with lethal access to the American dream. Because of racism and social alienation, as a result of politicization, the economic lure of drugs becomes a stabilizing factor for equal access. *Holler* represents the contemporary status and view of the politicization of the black male consciousness to the masculine design. One finds strong similarities with *Promised* in terms of drugs, violence, poverty, racism and generational confrontation; however, one does notice the potential for black male success if black men could see beyond politicization, as McCall eventually does. At the beginning of the text, the reader finds McCall in a two-parent home, in a middle class neighborhood; he regularly attends school but soon, however, takes a destructive path that leads him to prison. *Holler* confirms that there were still many perils to face when one grows up black and male in America. In a read of this text, I demonstrate the progression of politicization that leads McCall and some black males to reject participation in mainstream society.

McCall wastes no time in acquainting   the reader with the affect whiteness has on blacks. The beating of the white boy who rides his

bike through McCall's neighborhood on Cavalier Boulevard, harks back to Wright's beating in the South and Ralph Ellison's narrator's thoughts of beating a white man who refuses to "see" him. It is as if a type of ancestral retribution is taking place. The script is reversed: the white boy is beaten, according to McCall, because of the "general principle," i.e. whiteness, just as blackness evokes violence from whites during Wright's southern lessons. It is as if McCall and his friends are beating all white people on behalf of all black people. This is the rage that politicization builds on and almost makes McCall another black male casualty of the streets.

The politicization of the environment is what McCall first encounters. This occurs when one's environment is less than standard or equal because of the failure of social institutions to address the community's needs. McCall recalls two things that remind him of his shaky place in the world despite his sense of well-being in Cavalier manor: the poor whites that live close by and the little girl that is shot. According to McCall, "it is a twist of fate that well-off blacks live so close to the poorest, scruffiest-looking whites in the city" (9). As a result of this disparity, these whites terrorize blacks by hurling bricks and bottles at their cars as they take the short cut through Academy Park to get to their homes. They feel their whiteness even privileges them to terrorize Cavalier Manor itself.

McCall also recalls that when he was ten a little girl was shot while sitting near a picture window in her living room. No arrests are made and the killing brings home the fact that nice neighborhood or not, blacks still are not safe in Cavalier Manor. McCall's parents teach him to be leery of white folks and that whenever they are in the neighborhood it is an ominous sign.

 Another reminder of the tenuousness of McCall's life and environment is the big ditch filled with snakes and rodents that the city never closed off, and which "stood prominently in the main thoroughfare as an embarrassing monument to blackness" (10). To McCall , " it is as if the city fathers purposefully left it open to make a statement, to remind blacks that the community would only be so nice and that, no matter how uppity they got in cavalier Manor, the white folks downtown still called the shots (10). This type of politicization sends the message that blacks are not privileged to have peace of mind in their own neighborhoods; neighborhoods should never be too uppity in appearance. There most always be a reminder of where blacks belong.

Like in all the previous texts, race becomes the driving force of politicization at an early age for the protagonist. McCall learns, like Wright during his battle with the white boys from across the railroad tracks, the consequences of his skin color. He recalls putting clay on

his upper body like a little white girl while on the beach. The white girl privileges whiteness when she says, "if you let the clay dry, maybe you will be white like me" (11). Even at this young age, McCall and the little girl had already begun to learn their place in a "race-obsessed country."

Race affliction as a result of politicization is all around McCall. As his parents try to arm him with racial pride, they face many contradictions. His parents insist that he and his brothers "get meticulously well groomed and pressed whenever they are going somewhere around whites" (12). When either one dares act up in public or removes themselves from the soldier-like stance, they receive a whisper through clenched teeth from their mother to "stop acting like a nigger" (12). This is despite the fact that rowdy white kids enter the same public places, shiftless, barefoot with their parents, who allow them to do virtually anything. McCall envies the white kids' freedom and craves the specialness that excluded them from his own self-defeating burden: "it seemed that he was a nigger by birthright and destined to spend his entire life striving in vain to shed that rap. But white people could never be niggers, even when they acted like one" (12).

Here McCall recognizes the privilege of whiteness that many black males internalize early on. This internalization causes black males to

become trapped in environments that they know are destructive to them but cannot see beyond the rift of racism because of politicization. McCall's environment and the criminal acts he commits lead him to prison, but even the events leading up to his sentence are affected by race as McCall reveals: "I shot and nearly killed Plaz, a black man, and got a thirty-day sentence; I robbed a white business and didn't lay a finger on anybody and got twelve years" (150). To McCall, society values white life more than it did black. McCall's words also speak to Asim's conclusion that some black males now have to deal with the "subtler jargon of judical retrenchment" (30).

Like Brown, McCall pays close attention to his stepfather's racial nuances in his interactions with white people; he hates the way his stepfather humbles himself around whites. One day he accompanies his father to work on a large estate. While pulling crabgrass, three white boys, McCall's age, begin bouncing a ball very near where they are working. McCall waits for them to acknowledge his stepfather's presence in the way that his parents had taught him and his brothers to treat grown-ups when entering their company (16). Here McCall witnesses politicization when the boys treat his father like an "inanimate part of the scenery," and his father responds with a submissive smile. Here race protects the white boys from ever having to acknowledge blacks as their equals. This scene makes McCall self-

conscious of the fact that the boys were as self-assured about their exalted place in the world and that his father knew how contained his life is (16). This is the realization for McCall that there are two distinct worlds in America and a different set of rules for each: the white one is full of the possibilities of life. "The dark one is just that—dark and limited" (17). McCall wants to gain respect from a society that has not learned to give it to African-Americans. His father, however, would view this behavior as laziness.

McCall understands his father's behavior during the summer of 1971 while working at a construction site. As the water boy, McCall cursed and fussed at constantly and never called by his real name. He views the supervisor as an overseer and can not understand why the other black men do not come to his aid. The face of the country had changed for blacks since Jim Crow, but not in the minds of some whites. McCall wants to prove that he is not lazy or scared to work, but it required painful psychic sacrifices to remain employed. Like his father who is a tower of force to reckon with at home but a submissive entity while working for whites, McCall develops two distinct personalities: away from work he is the "baad-assed nigger" who demands respect; on the job, he is a "passive Negro" who lets the white men push him around. The "badd-assed nigger" translates into respect for black men. McCall feels like he can only get such respect

from the urban streets of America. Here one notices what Fanon calls "the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of the other" (17).

In other words, black men behave differently around white men, especially in terms of language and masculine performance. Wright, Brown, and McCall all recall being in the presence of whites in which standard English is a must. Fanon argues that this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation" (17). I posit that this self-division evolves into black male spectragraphia in which the black male is positioned to be cognizant of his behavior because of a privileged white presence/gaze and at the same time present an equal reflection. Only black males who have access to and follow society's route to success can hope to replicate the reflection; others rebel against it by creating a distinct reflection that redefines them as black men. If one agrees with Fanon that language is not only syntactical but also assumes a culture and supports the weight of society, one notices that McCall, Brown, and Wright have always privileged whiteness in the presence of whites, but the roles are never reversed; "for not only must the black man be black, he must be black in relation to the white man but the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (110). In each, blackness is always negative and

restricted. It's no wonder that blacks and whites feel socially alienated when they are the minority in each other's groups.

McCall recognizes the respect he seeks when he meets Turkey Buzzard's father who is known as Country. He recognizes a duality that exists between other fathers and Country: other fathers looked "bent over and defeated" when they came home from work but Country "stood tall and proud." Country drives Cadillacs, has gold teeth, and is always "as clean as the Board of Health." Because of politicization, it does not matter to McCall that Country most likely acquired his money illegally. All that matters to McCall is that Country "does not earn his living slaving at a shipyard or bowing to white folks on some other gig" (84). This frame of mind is a result of the generational change that was taking place all across black America. According to McCall, his stepfather is from the deep South and cut from the civil rights mold, and thus believes that blacks can overcome racism by "slaving hard and making do with what little they had" (86).

On the other hand, McCall's generation is more militant and less inclined to make compromises because of the color of their skin. These are radical changes that filter into the heads of the new generation of black males growing up in American cities. Still, for a while, all hope seems lost for McCall as he participates in delinquent activity to create

a masculine identity. This part of his life is analyzed in chapter three "Prescriptions for Masculinity."

Like Wright and Brown, McCall eventually crosses over to the white mainstream in order to find a legal job, after finally understanding that street life can quickly end his life.   In the mainstream, however, the true essence of politicization becomes clear. To some measure Wright, Brown, and McCall understand that delinquent activity is wrong and that they may have to pay the price if caught. But it becomes clear to McCall while working for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* that to the white mainstream it doesn't matter if you are participating in legal or illegal activity; there are still limitations in both worlds, and you are treated differently because you are black.   McCall comes to this conclusion after several black colleagues make mistakes in articles that require the paper to print a correction.   After the black writer, Cassandra, makes two mistakes, the editor freezes her out by giving her fewer and fewer assignments until her confidence is broken. During an evaluation, an editor cites mistakes that Michael, another black writer, has made in stories over a few years. Along with other black reporters, McCall discovers that some white reporters have required numerous corrections in a single year—more than Michael has in his entire stay at the paper. Michael prepares a formal written response to the editor who backed off, but the editor finds other ways

to hound him, causing him to take a leave of absence from which he never returns. These politicizing situations discourage black males from trying to survive in the white mainstream or take traditional routes to success. To McCall, the problems at the paper are the same problems blacks faced everywhere: "No matter how we tried to fit in and help improve the system we couldn't win for losing" (330). This frame of mind makes it hard for McCall and other black males to interact with whites, even those who are sincere. This difficulty is the result of politicization, i.e. racism, as McCall makes clear: "race relations in this country have become so complex and convoluted that it's hard nowadays to tell in interactions with whites what's racial and what's not" (330).

Politicization further effects how McCall and other black men interact with their offspring, which, according to him, are "doubled-edged swords" to be flaunted and dodged at the same time. Children confirm manhood, but at the same time threaten to rob their fathers of the little freedom they have. For McCall, children meant you had to play by the establishment's rules to keep them clothed and fed, subjecting yourself to the White man. This makes black men vulnerable, and no black man wants to be more vulnerable to the world than he already is (274). McCall fears being a father because he is still struggling to make sense of the world and racism. How could

he prepare his children? This fear echoes when Debbie gives birth to McCall's second son. Debbie sees the joys of motherhood in baby food and nursery rhymes, but he sees pain: "job rejections and racial slights, and self-doubt and maybe even self-hate" (298).

The *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, *Black Boy*, Manchild in the *Promised,* and *Holler* clearly show that politicization has wreaked havoc on the black male consciousness. Its main weapon is racism which results in social alienation and internalized racism. These are the obstacles that prevent many black males from using traditional roots to achieve success and construct a more positive masculine identity. bell hooks explains the confusion:

> Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism (1).

What hooks means is that blacks can look at stereotypical images of black males and put them off as harmless without recognizing the threat they pose to the larger society if they go unchecked. One can agree that stereotypes are very valuable in bringing understanding of one culture to the other and a sense of distinctness to culture itself, but Wright, Brown, and McCall prove what happens to young black

men who take stereotypical prescriptions for masculinity under the weight of politicization.

It is because of politicization that black men can not recognize new visions of masculinity that Na'im Akbar posits: a masculinity that is formed out of the natural expressions and experiences of Africans . The idea, according to Akbar, is to "view an aspect of this experience, the reality of being black men, from the full range of what is considered real by ancient criteria of science as established by African minds long ago" (x). Akbar asserts that black men can not envision this because the mentality of the black male today is the mentality of the slave (6). He explains:

> Look at the slave: he's dependent, he's passive, and he's totally waiting for his biological needs to be taken care of by someone else. Look at the male and compare him with the slave who delights in being used as a stud and gains his personal value by his ability to be a stud. Please understand that the people who developed and implemented the slave-making process understood some of the basic laws of human nature, and they understood that they could impede the transforming process. They locked the slaves into "maleness" so that they would stay dependent, non-rebellious and essentially passive in vital areas of human existence. This protected the master and restrained the slave. This "male mentality" predominates in people who are not willing to take the prerogatives and responsibilities of real manhood. (6)

Akbar's point is well taken regarding the transforming process, but I disagree when he claims that the mind of the black male is stuck in a slave mentality, especially since gender was only recognized in slavery

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in regards to reproduction and not as a subject identifier. Male slaves were biologically male but not socially male. The vision is impaired because black males have internalized the stud image and other masculine prescriptions as a result of politicization that racism causes. The stud, I further argue, is a recuperation of sexual prowess motif of the badman/tricksters used to establish a masculine identity because black males lack access to the white design. Politicization has caused black males to renegotiate masculinity into prescriptions of performance to prove their existence in a white male dominated society. At least, this is how it started out as the earlier discussion of the trickster indicated, but these prescriptions backfire in contemporary society and become part of the politicization process that black males attempt to overcome, making black males their own worst enemies. These prescriptions are consumed by society as a whole and are continuously perpetuated by it and black males themselves. Consequently it will take more than black males to help recast black masculinity, as hooks explains:

> The struggle-needs to include non-black allies as well. Images of race and representation have become a contemporary obsession. Com-modification of blackness has created a social context where appropriation by non-black people of the black image knows no boundaries. If the many non-black people who produce images or critical narratives about blackness and black people do not interrogate their perspective, they may simply recreate the imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize (7).

This is the cycle that has been created as black males formed prescriptions to construct masculinity.

At the core of the maintenance of politicization is what David Troutt refers to as "the race industry." This industry, according to Troutt, consists of hierarchical pillars of corporate media, entertainment, academia, government, and the law (53). At the top are money makers who drive the decision focus of the industry. And while there are anti-market-makers, "they usually toil in the grass roots of experience and memory, ghettoized into only occasional relevance" (53). African Americans must penetrate the ranks of the race industry and make well informed decisions to provide more diverse services for cultural existence. Otherwise, the industry will continue to treat "its on subjects like barely understood signifiers of national citizenship…with our children becoming students and consumers of its obsolete products and packaging" (54, 67).

Chapter 3: Prescriptions for Black Masculinity: Let's Get Crunk

This chapter as a whole explores the tensions created by social alienation and how it manifests in black male performance of masculinity and specifically argues that outward appearances and behavior—i.e, baggy and sagging clothes, being hip, the proper strut technique, tough language, and fist fighting skills to back it up— become tropes through which black men navigate societal expectations and their envisioned masculinity. Richard Majors and Janet Billson refer to this as cool pose. Through a continued analysis of Douglass, Wright, Brown, and McCall's works, the evolution and mechanisms of these prescriptions are discovered. The prescriptions that black males design for black masculinity helped them to adjust to the social and historical environment in which they live and develop distinct attributes to attract attention to and form their masculinity. I conclude this chapter by using Lacan's notion of the gaze in identity formation to assert that these prescriptions are an attempt by black males to create a gaze that they control and one which is more empowering than the national gaze of the black male created during their early history, as discussed in chapter 1. But something went terribly wrong and black males have become locked into an imagined gaze that they

think they control, and one that empowers them; but in reality this construct prevents access to a truer masculine design.

The first prescription of masculinity is to be recognized as a man, as Douglass's narrative explores. This was very difficult for black men to achieve during slavery, because the institution became provider for the families of black men; black men themselves became studs to produce more slaves. Throughout the narrative, Douglass positions himself as a self-made man. One of the first things one recognizes about the narrative is that it's a very masculine narrative. Whenever a man is mentioned, such as Demby, he shows the resistance and the defiance of black males against the institution of slavery, even if it means death. Douglass often boasts of the times he overcomes beatings and use them to solidify his masculinity. This is especially the case when he fights Covey. He attributes his escape of slavery to his own individual accomplishments. This is evident in his ability to write passes, which completes his self-made identity. But we see the most telling prescriptions in later texts.

From the very beginning of *Black Boy*, one notices that Wright's family is having a hard time meeting their basic needs, especially without a father around. One can assume the father left because it was hard taking care of a family compared to his mistress. Thus Wright's hunger pains evoke the image of his father because he was

the major provider. Wright himself tries to fill his father's shoes at an early age, but it was not enough to keep the family from being evicted several times or relieve their hunger

During the era of *Black Boy*, one of the central foundations for the prescriptions for black masculinity is set: a peer group. It is in this group that all prescriptions manifest and become detrimental to the black male psyche if it's given too much control in a black male's life. Wright describes the transformation that takes place when one becomes a part of a peer group:

> It was degrading to play with girls and in our talk we relegated them to a remote island of life. We had somehow caught the spirit of the role of our sex and we flocked together for common moral schooling. We spoke boastfully in bass voices; we used the word "nigger" to prove the tough fiber of our feelings; we spouted excessive profanity as a sign of our coming manhood; we pretended callousness toward the injunctions of our parents; and we strove to convince one another that our decisions stemmed from ourselves and ourselves alone. Yet we frantically concealed how dependent we were upon one another (91).

Here one notices the power of black male bonding which is furthered discussed in chapter four but more importantly one notices the prescriptions of masculinity: language and group camaraderie. During Wright's time, these groups are harmless because of the limited environment in which they live and are mainly used to create a sense of belonging because of social alienation from society and from their parents who are too busy trying to make a living.

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Another prescription for masculinity is defiance to people outside the group. A group member by the name of Davi, in *Black Boy,* shows this when he refuses to answer his mother when she calls him in for the evening. To do so is considered a sign of dependence or weakness. This type of defiance leads to death and violence during Brown's and McCall's life experience because their world is not as limited as Wright's. One notices hints of violence when Wright and his friends battle with the white boys. These battles would never take place one on one because there would be no group solidarity. There is power in numbers, not only in physical bodies but also in terms of an agreed upon mental consciousness that directs group action.

Fighting becomes a two fold prescription for Wright. He fights with family members to maintain a sense of masculinity while family members themselves try to mute it for his own protection during this hostile era. As Wright becomes a teenager, he refuses to be beaten for trivial incidents he has nothing do with. One such incident occurs with his aunt Addie in her classroom when a boy behind Wright pushes nut hulls under Wright's desk. Addie wants to punish Wright for this and probably for calling her Aunt Addie in front of the class. Here Wright's masculinity is threatened because he is accused of something he did not do in the first place and to receive a beating by one's aunt

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in front of his "boys" makes him appear weak. Another important attempted beating occurs when Wright is living with his Uncle Tom. Tom wants to beat Wright for the non-submissive way he tells him the current time. Wright's voice is too masculine and authoritarian for a boy his age. Wright speaks to him as he does his other family members and is shocked that his uncle, a man who has never lived near him or had any say in his rearing or lack of, is trying to whip him.

Despite the fact that Wright is living with his uncle, he is very much is his own man; he provides his own meals, clothes and sends money to his granny. And now a strange uncle who feels that he is impolite is going to teach him to "cat" as he had seen the backward black boys act on the plantations, is going to teach him to grin, hang his head, and mumble apologetically when he is spoken to (186). There are other beatings in the text and they all serve to strip Wright of his recognition of the self so that he can function safely in the white world, but he rebels. He doesn't want to relive his uncle's life, which is a warning to him. Therefore, he stands his ground. From this point on, he "knew that his life was revolving about a world that he had to encounter and fight when he grew up" (147).

As Wright grows older, the pressure of status to be like his peers increases, as it does in many peer groups. He envies his schoolmates who go in the grocery store and pick out what they want to eat. Rather

than participate in delinquent activity, Wright is reserved with his schoolmates, "seeking their company but never letting them guess how much he was being kept out of the world in which they lived, valuing their casual friendship but hiding it , acutely self-conscious but covering it with a quick smile and a ready phrase" (148). Here Wright employs the trickster motif of deception which allows him to still be a part of the group without revealing his weakness.

After several attempts at job hunting, Wright acquires a job as a houseboy, which provides him with enough money to participate in the status gaining process. At the midday recess, he crowds into the corner store and eat sandwiches with the boys, slamming down his own money on the counter for what he wants (177). He is also admired for the new clothes he buys every week. The ability to participate gives Wright a sense of control and independence. Further control is gained through his boasting to his friends about all the food he manages to eat when his employer's back is turned. This type of boasting, also known as woofing, is a "behavioral pattern that conveys only predisposition for violence and promotes masculinity" (Majors 24). However, one notices a drastic change regarding boasting for urban black males that almost always leads to violence in *Manchild* and *Holler*.

As Wright enters adulthood, some prescriptions loose weight, such as boasting, vulgar, language and fighting, but the recognition of the self remains strong. Because Wright has to help provide for his family, he begins to associate less with friends. Add to that the religious home in which he lives, and the mush-and-lard gravy poverty, one finds that he is cut off from the normal processes of the lives of black boys his own age (204). Wright's recognition of the self is tested when his principal wants him to read a graduation speech that would be acceptable to a white board member in the audience, but Wright gives his own speech about what he will become not what society would let him become. With almost seventeen years of baffled living behind him, he faces the world in 1925.

But he can not follow the code of silence that many in the black community practiced at the time. "This motif of silence conceptualizes the difficulty that Wright had in establishing himself as a fully conscious individual (Tate 118)." His mother's beatings were to teach that his skin color did not privilege him to be treated or recognized as a man. He sees the reality this teaching on several jobs. At the optical plant, he learns that he is not presumed worthy to learn how to cut lenses, a white man's trade, as his boss has promised. The job at the hotel offers a little relief since most of the people he worked with were black, but here too "he marveled at how smoothly the black boys

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acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them" (232). Wright listens for hours at the curses and sex stories of the other males, "wondering how on earth they could laugh so freely, trying to grasp the miracle that gave their debased lives the semblance of a human existence" (233). Meanwhile, white watchmen pat their women on the buttocks whenever they want. On every job, Wright is treated as an "other" with very little respect and confined to particular roles because he reveals, often without thinking, his rebellious consciousness, and as a result disturbs every facet of the southern social framework (Tate 118).

The prescriptions for masculinity found in Douglass and Wright are more for mental and economic survival. Each wants to be respected as a man and be able to make a decent living. Even when Wright participates in a ticket scam at the theaters, it's only to get enough money to go north. Stealing doesn't become habitual or status gaining for Wright like it does in *Promised* and *Holler*. Also early prescriptions that Wright learns from his peer group fade away as he reaches adulthood, making them harmless. But *Promised opens* a whole new world for masculinity. Like Wright, the black males in *Promised* want respect and self-recognition but it's a very different world in which they become their own worst enemy. These males also want economic status but not only for survival but to represent how well they are

doing. It is here that the " bling, bling" phenomenon begins in which expensive material possessions represents status. These new black males manage the impression they communicate to others through the use of an imposing array of masks, acts, and facades to help them perform their masculinity (Majors and Billson 5).

Brown's *Promised* wastes no time in introducing us to the violent world of masculinity. On the first page of chapter one, the reader is greeted with the gunshot wound that Brown receives while stealing with his gang. The world for black males has grown in *Promised*, especially in the Northern cities. Their environment is increasingly becoming large urban ghettos that have very little protection from crime and poverty. It is still very hard to make a living but raising a black male becomes the biggest challenge because, unlike the South, which limited black male behavior, these urban communities created new problems for black males to deal with.

Belonging to a peer group/gang is one the first prescriptions of masculinity in the new urban world. It is in this group, which includes Toto, Buck, Bulldog, Danny and a host of others, that Brown participates in delinquent activity. It is in this group that he learns how to steal and take off from school, which is known as "catting." I will explore these peer groups more closely in the next chapter.

Female domination and sexual prowess also become a prescription for masculinity. Brown and his friends are educated about women through the eyes of Johnny D, one of the hippest guys around. To Johnny, every female is a bitch, even mothers. To him there are some nice "bitches," but they are still bitches. And a man, according to Johnny, has to be a dog in order to handle his bitch. Johnny D. brings reality to this statement when he gets mad at Clara and takes her on the roof and let Brown and other guys " run a train on her" (have sex). This is Brown's first sexual experience. Thus, it's not surprising that female domination and sexual prowess are so important to masculinity. Not every black male has such an experience but most black males have been pressured into having or wanting to have sex in a peer group.

The primary reason why black males have such views of women is that they are born into a male dominated society. Powell argues that such a demeaning view of women is a process that black males learn over a period time, one that often goes unchecked and sometimes is encouraged, both directly and indirectly, by other sources besides the peer group (54). Powell recalls how "his education at home with his mother, at school, on his neighborhood playgrounds, and at church all "placed" males at the center of the universe, with popular culture only

adding and solidifying his training (55). Now Brown and his friends' objectification of women and hypersexuality becomes clear.

It must be noted that this prescription, hypersexuality, is one of America's most durable and deadly stereotypes about black men. It can be traced back to the early 1500's, when European explorers in West Africa became fascinated with black sexual practices. One explorer, according Earl Hutchinson, called the penises of Mandingo tribesmen "burthensome members" because of their size (70). It wouldn't take long for such notions to include all African men resulting in a myth that could be elevated to national hysteria, creating the inferior black hypersexual brute (70). So there should be no doubt as to why (sex)uality seems to be written on the consciousness of black men. And though it is one the most destructive images created about black men, it is one that is also embraced and will be most difficult to deconstruct because the notion that black men have a stronger capacity for sexual enjoyment or simply that black men " do it" more better is one that most black males accept gratefully (Chapman and Rutherford 119). But these sexual savage images of the black male "tell us more about the repressed fears and fantasies of European civilization than they do about black people's experience of sexual intimacy (ibid)." This fact is an interesting inquiry for another time.

The acquisition of materials that represent wealth is yet another prescription for masculinity. These acquisitions denote the style of the black male. Black males have learned in the "streetscape of their neighborhoods to walk, talk and, act in ways that advertise coolness." Brown recalls how he never wanted to get caught catting before he stole a new suit. To him, the suit would make anybody look respectable, and "the cops wouldn't bother you if you looked respectable". According to Brown, you could also see how "slick a nigger was" in the street by the suit he wore. One such person is Mr. Jimmy, a hustler, who knew how to "git by" so well in the streets that he hadn't had a job in twenty-years. He changed cars every year, dressed up with shined shoes every day of the week, always had plenty of money, always had a pretty woman with him, and kept his hair slicked back. Thus, you have the ultimate trickster/badman who is able to have success without participating in the white mainstream, something every black male wants to accomplish. Thus style informs the black male's audience how he wishes to be seen and presumably how well he is living.

Because of his lack of appropriate clothing, Brown rarely goes to school. Like Brown, for many black males school is only cool if you can afford the latest attire and participate in the coolest activities. Black males who can not participate distance themselves. He can not

afford to dress like the other guys unless he sells pot on the street. A

typical school day for fifteen year old Brown consists of selling drugs,

shooting craps, and having sex. Thus Brown's growth is channeled

through the narrow parameters of experiences deemed by his peer

group and himself as cool. Brown, Wright, and McCall all want to

participate with the larger society, but they do not have the same

access as their white counterparts so their behavior may be seen as a

form of anger and rebellion, especially when so many other black

males are in similar situations. This wide spread anger however,

"cannot be treated as merely as a symptom of individual psychological

distress, but it most be approached as symptomatic of an underlying

social disease" (Gibbs 141). This analogy allows one to analyze more

closely the fundamental social factors that contribute to the anger that

Douglass, Wright, Brown, and McCall and contemporary black males

feel over poverty, discrimination, social isolation, and political

powerlessness.

Brown's typical school days become so boring that he returns on

his own to the Warwick detention facility where most of his friends are.

Here at Warrick, Brown reveals to his readers the coolness of language

that develops among black males in addition to vulgar language. It is

in 1951, according to Brown, that he hears the expression "baby" used

by one black male to address another. At the time, such language had

a "hip ring to it." "Only colored cats could give it the meaning that we all knew it had without ever mentioning it—the meaning of black masculinity," states Brown (165). Thus simultaneously, although this word ostensibly weakens masculinity because of its denotation and connotation, just speaking the words means one is sure of his masculinity. The word went beyond the world of urban black males to permeate jazz musicians and the hip set, boxers, dancers, comedians and many other places in Harlem. It was the introduction of black reflection and soul (166). However, it was also related to the introduction of heroin in the black communities.

Many theories over the years have come about how drugs were introduce into black communities, but the one involving the Central Intelligence Agency is most prominent. According to John Parker, for over a decade or more the CIA sold weapons and drugs to two Los Angeles youth gangs, the Crips and the Bloods. "The CIA then funneled millions of dollars in drug profits to U.S.-trained terrorist in an effort to oust the Sandinista government in Nicaragua during the 1980s." Parker further adds that the Sandnista had overthrown the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship in 1979 in a mass-based revolution. According to Parker, Robert Knight and Dennis Bernstein first aired the story of the CIA's involvement on Pacifica radio on their "Undercurrents" series in 1986. The national series interviewed pilots

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carrying drugs, contras, and drug-enforcement officials. These events became widely know from a series of articles by the San Jose, California *Mercury News.* The CIA investigated itself, according to Parker, but agents from the Drug Enforcement Agency, Los Angeles Sheriff's Department and the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement complained of CIA interference into investigations of the drug dealers in the case, Blandon and Meneses. Thus, it's easy to see how gangs turned so violent during the 1980's and drugs permeated black cities across America. All of sudden black people knew drugs were everywhere in their community, but they wondered who was driving the boats and plane to get them there. They new it was not the kids on the corner who were hauled off to prison or detention centers for selling drugs. And it's not surprising that they became victims once again during America's war on drugs.

Heroin has become a double edged sword for black men and black people in general. Selling heroin, and drugs in general, allows black males to avoid participating in the white mainstream by providing economic status, but this gain was/is at the expense of other black males and the larger black community. Many black males use heroin, like pot, as one of their prescriptions for masculinity to be cool. And many who used pot and alcohol to escape everyday problems tried heroin; some never came back and became junkies. Drugs combined

with social alienation and politicization devastated the black psyche and continues to disrupt the quest for masculinity today because of economic hold on black males. Brown and McCall watched as drugs took over neighborhoods and entire black communities. "It was as though drugs were a ghost, a big ghost, haunting the community" (180). These junkies became the backdrop of African-American ghettos as they wreaked havoc on the city trying to finding something to sell in order to get a quick fix in the mix of a revolution for masculinity. I say revolution because Brown and black males in general are confronted with the formidable challenges of developing a positive identity as self-directed individuals in the context of overworked families, broken communities, and a discriminatory society, while managing the turmoil of adolescence (Paster 216). Thus black males become "special objects of projection for a white-male-dominated society that focuses on his blackness and his maleness as representations of its disowned self" (217).

Brown discusses this revolution with his friend Alley in order to make him understand that social alienation and domination leaves little room for a revolution, no matter how angry one gets. As an adult reflecting back on his life, Brown realizes that he, and other black males, through their delinquent behavior are fighting their own

revolution. Brown's recalls how his revolution began when he was six years old:

> ...I fought it everyday in the streets of Harlem, in the streets of Brooklyn, in the streets of the Bronx and Lower Manhattan, all over—when I was there stealing, raising hell out there, playing hookey. I rebelled against school because the teachers are white. And I went downtown and robbed the stores because the storeowners were white. I ran through the subways because the cats in the change booth were white (329).

Once again social alienation comes in play with a dual reality. On the one hand, this alienation instills in the black male consciousness that they are denied access to mainstream society. On the other hand the rebellion that this alienation causes, which black males use to cope with and maintain some sense of status, plunges the black male into a boomerang existence that feeds black on black crime. Thus the revolutions become hopeless because many of the black males are seemingly making progress (329). Having been denied a natural development of their sense of manliness, black males must constantly prove to themselves that they are men (Keil 22).

Despite the almost hopeless forecast, Promised reveals a powerful revelation for black males: progress can not be achieved by avoiding the white mainstream and prescribed formulas of masculinity only compound and confuse the black male psyche. This could have been a turning point from which black males can recast masculinity, but drugs intrude to provide black males with a deadly weapon to use to

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function, succeed materially, without participating in the mainstream. This is the devastating transformation that the prescriptions for masculinity take in McCall's *Holler* while simultaneously black males follow the tune of prescribed masculinity.

Unlike Wright and Brown, the black males in *Holler* do not face levels of extreme poverty, but the text makes clear that the politicization of the black male consciousness through social alienation is alive. What is interesting about McCall and the other black males in his text is that they are supposedly in a middle class neighborhood but their parents have working class jobs. Yet the fact remains that their environment should have provided enough social continuity to keep them from behavior that would eventually lead them to prison or get them killed. Clearly for McCall and black males today, the world is a better place but most seem trapped in a paradox, according to Cose, because their options and potential choices are so much greater threat than their predecessors(11), making it difficult to focus on a genuine masculine design. Thus McCall's text reveals the power of the prescriptions of masculinity on black male youth and how these can cross all class boundaries if certain control mechanisms are not in place. Through *Holler,* one notices the intensity of prescribed masculinity, which has resulted in some contemporary male behavior and performance.

Like the word "baby" used in *Promised*, Holler also has defined explanations for certain masculine language. For instance, the word "boy" was still commonly used by whites to refer to grown black men, according to McCall. To counter the indignity, young black males addressed each other as "man": "Hey, man, you goin' to play basketball today?" "Naw, man, I got too much homework to do." "Boy" reduces black males into a being that can not think for itself, one unequal to white men. As a result, "Boy" became one of the most detested, disrespectful things somebody could call a black male (17). At the core of the word "man" is pride, which is of colossal importance to black men who are willing to risk anything for it, even their lives (Majors and Billson 39).

For black males during McCall's time, fighting is also the ultimate way to gain respect. "The whole emphasis in the streets on being able to rumble is rooted in respect." It didn't matter how something was; if it made one appear weak, then steps had to be take to one's respect and toughness. Black males who have the most violent tempers and the most defiant attitudes gain the greatest respect and act as a catalyst for other black males. Thus many black males try to establish themselves as a bad man. Mancin argues that this tough-guy style may be a by-product of family socialization because some black males learn both affection and disapproval, especially toward their fathers,

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brothers, and other male relatives, through tough playing (25). This norm of toughness may cause conflict and trouble with others outside the family, such as teachers, and may lead the youth to seek out peers who also are at home with tough behavior. But on a more psychological level, McCall and black males in general may resort to violence, because failure to do so is a threat to their identity and their security as men. Men's worst fears about themselves and their ambivalent feelings towards women and society can any threat produce defensive hostility and outright violence (Eardley 118).

Under certain circumstance and in certain environments, carrying a gun becomes one of the last additives for respect, which reminds us of the opening chapter of *Promised*. Most young black males do not realize the responsibilities of having a gun. It's just another cool prescription additive. McCall almost shoots a friend while cleaning a gun he thinks is unloaded. Nonchalantly, he waves the gun at his friend to make a point during a conversation and almost shoots him in the head. Carrying a gun, he soon becomes aware "that he [has] the power to alter the fate of anybody." He feels invincible, like a bad man. For McCall and many other black males, guns [are] the great equalizer; even adults began to look vulnerable (73).

The prescriptions for masculinity force McCall to use his gun one day when he, his girlfriend Liz and son Monroe are at the fair. Plaz

and a group of his friends confront Liz about flashing her middle finger at Plaz earlier that week. Under the laws of prescribed masculinity, this is disrespect and action must be taken, especially if it's done in front of a large crowd and in front of one's girlfriend. After sending Liz and Monroe to the car, McCall shoots Plaz with a .22 caliber pistol in the chest. McCall feels powerful, almost God-like to the point that he wants to shoot Plaz again, but he is stopped by his friend Greg. McCall relates the incident to his stepfather and turns himself in. Here one notices a powerful revelation about cool pose according to Dworkin and Dworkin: the most tragic aspect of cool is that it exists not only as the handmaiden of survival in the ghetto, but that it has become a self-sustaining pattern independent of it's original functional significance (16). In other words, black males are unable to turn cool pose off when it is no longer needed.

After Plaz makes it through surgery, detectives release McCall on his own recognizance. To McCall, it is an indication about how "they" felt about the value of black life (121). But even more disturbing is the glory and toughness McCall feels after he finds out that Plaz is going to survive, and how he would not be charged with murder. His masculine glory increases as knowledge of the shooting spreads through the street grapevine; his reputation becomes solidified and his performance of masculinity becomes stronger.

McCall's text adds coolness to the list of prescriptions for masculinity also, but in more definitive terms than *Promised*. *Holler* gives the reader a closer look at the pimp character. One way to be cool is to be a pimp. Proud and defiant, the pimp has a bouncy stride. To achieve the bounce, the pimp takes a regular step with one leg, and then he hops or drags the other leg on the second step. This act of cool pose is part of the black male's expressive life-style (Major and Billson 19). It's become second nature to some black males today. This walk makes the pimp look cool and tough. Every black male, according to McCall, had to learn the walk if he wanted to be cool because "the conspicuous and expressive nature of the African-American male's walk is a way to announce his presence, to accentuate himself, and to broadcast his prideful power (73)." The walk is based on rhythm and style. Unlike most white males' robot-like walk, the black walk is slower---more like a stroll: the head is slightly elevated and tipped to one side. One arm swings at the side with the hand slightly cupped. The other hand hangs straight to the side or is slipped into the pocket: "the gait is slow, casual….almost like a walking dance, with all parts of the body moving in rhythmic harmony (*Holler* 74). The walk can serve as a threatening and confirming means of power in the face of hostile representatives of the mainstream: teachers, police, and store owners. Thus through

expressive performance, unconscious black males hope to escape the unbearable "psychic and social stigmas attached to them" (Wallace), but in reality they only feed existing media and social stigmas that make it harder for them reap the benefits of Eurocentric social institutions.   For example, because teachers tend to misinterpret, overreact to, and become frightened of black male's culture-specific behaviors, black males are more often suspended, punished, and recommended for remedial classes (Majors 10).

Pimps are also well dressed, according to McCall. He and his friends hustle and steal hard to maintain their pimp status. These pimps are part of the cool cat life-style: "the cool cat is an exceptional artist of expressiveness and flamboyant style. He creates his unique identity by artfully dipping into a colorful palette of clothes and hairstyles that set him apart from the ordinary (78)." As a pimp, one is admired by other black males and wooed by girls, regardless of looks or personality. You can also tell a pimp by the way he drives, with his wrist resting limply on the steering wheel while "gangster-leaning" until it appears he is sitting in the middle of the car. This is commonly known as "low-riding." This performance is designed to draw attention to both the driver and the car.   The luxury car or cars with expensive accents are mobile status symbols for black males that epitomize class and status in physical space.   They relish being seen, a critical

experience for black men who are in the vision of others but whose realities remain invisible to the larger society. A pimp often sacrifices other economic goods in his life or his family's life and/or participates in criminal activity to perform his masculinity (83).

Popular culture strengthens the pimp character in the mind of McCall and his friends. During McCall's early life, the movie *Superfly* (1972) was released, staring Ron O'Neal, who played a high rolling drug dealer who made millions selling cocaine, avoided participating in white mainstream, and drove a shiny Eldorado. This film gave urban black males in particular a black hero. This movie, along with *The Mack*, glamorized the drug trade and gave the black urban answer to capitalism (102). These popular culture films and the ones that followed, such as hood films, present a profound reality for the black male image. Because of politicization, McCall and his friends viewed the life style portrayed in the film a worthy alternative compared to participating in the "white system":

> ...to our way of thinking, it was no more far-fetched than the civil right's notion that white people would welcome us into their system with open arms if we begged and prayed and marched enough. As for as risks, dealing drugs seemed no more risky than working a thankless job at the shipyard for thirty years, always under the fear of being laid off. It was six of one and half a dozen of the other (103).

Either way black males felt they were taking a risk, but by participating in the drug trade they could maintain a sense of control and perform masculinity.

Stereotyped popular culture images makes it hard for positive counter images to be effective because the racism of McCall's time with each new generation of black males is rarely viewed as racism or excessive stereotypes. These media images play on the similar images found in black male culture and supersize them through media exposure and black males replicate them as their own and American cultural in general are bamboozled with the same images that to them subconsciously become more representative of black reality than fiction. Thus "countervailing [media], of all kinds, aimed at dispelling the negative images rarely arise, and when they do they are apt to be dismissed as humorless, political, extreme, or [exceptions to the norm] (Delgado and Stefancic 212). This explains why McCall and his friends and back males in general are so affected by popular culture. The political correctness of popular culture to represent the various stereotypical reality of black life and behavior, according to Wallace, may be "precisely the issue when it comes to the general inability of the dominant culture to take black people serious and to see them as [diverse] human beings" (300).

McCall's mother gives him an ominous warning that he does not understand until   years later: "You gonna learn one day that life out there ain't as easy as you think it is" (95) Like McCall, black males trapped by the prescriptions of masculinity fail to understand they cannot use the master's tools to dismantle the house through performance; they have to construct their own.

Sexual prowess is taken to a more vicious level in *Holler* compared to the other texts. It's very typical for black males at a certain age to wonder and talk about sex, but if left unchecked it can lead to male domination and a warped view of female sexuality. At the age of fourteen, McCall is summoned by a friend over the phone to come to Turkey Buzzard's place where they are holding a girl captive in a bed with twelve other black males waiting in the living room. McCall consciously knows he wants to grab the girl's hand and escort her home, but the peer pressure for him to meet the masculine standards of the group is too much. So he remains silent while they convince the girl to have sex with them; they call it running a train.

Though I mentioned earlier that the super sexualized labels has been branded on to mind of black men by a white male dominated society, at this contemporary juncture of "reading" McCall's novel, one can not remove black men from these sexual myths as contributors

and facillators of their reproductions. Because black men, according to

Brent Staples, are

> denied equal access to the prosaic symbols of manhood, they
> manifest their masculinity in the most extreme form of sexual
> domination. When they have been unable to achieve status in
> the workplace, they have exercised the privilege of their
> manliness and attempted to achieve it in the bedroom. Feeling a
> constant need to affirm their masculinity, tenderness and
> compassion are eschewed as signs of weakness which leave
> them vulnerable to ever-feared possibility of female domination
> (85).

Here Staples identifies the ascription of sexual superiority in which

McCall and his friends feel the need to control and dominate the young

girl in order to elevate them to another level of masculinity. The

implications of black male bonding on the sexual edict of black males

are revealed in the next chapter.

The last chapter of McCall's text is appropriately called Cycles.

McCall comes to realize, as a father, the influence that prescribed

masculinity has on his eighteen year-old son:

> I sensed that the cultural pull of pseudo-macho hip-hop
> fads was even more powerful than the things that once
> influenced me. I began to see signs of that after he met
> and started hanging with some cats at a local basketball
> court: He bopped with a more pronounced pimp and
> started letting his baggy jeans fall lower on his behind; he
> suddenly became resistant to doing household chores and
> took on that arrogant body language that teenagers use as
> their coded way of telling their parents to go to hell (410).

McCall as a father recognizes early that his son Monroe is traveling a

dangerous path, and moves to Arlington to take him out of the hood.

Unlike his parents and many parents today, he has rap sessions with his son about life and growing up black and male. This type of open communication makes it very easy for Monroe to ask if it was ok to take sex from a girl "if you take her out, and she won't give it up" (410). McCall at this age received an affirmative answer from his peer group, but here he had a rare opportunity to rewrite the script for this prescription of masculinity. He confesses to his son about all the terrible things he did to girls and therefore could not bring himself to preach to Monroe about what was right. Instead, he uses Monroe's mother as an example of an alternative to the danger in viewing females as pieces of meat. For all the prescriptions that Monroe encounters, McCall talks and communicates living and personal examples that gives him more guidance in constructing his masculinity. Monroe becomes the first grandchild to finish school, and McCall is confident that he has skipped the rite of passage to prison.

The risk taking and self-destructive aspects of these prescriptions, which make up cool pose, are often "symbolically expressed as part of a compulsive masculinity, where typical masculine values, that were discussed earlier, become rigid (Majors and Billson 24). These prescriptions and their catalysts limit the actual masculinity of black males because instead of having what Richard Merelman calls a "defined cultural projection (94)" of new and empowered modes of

masculinity black males continue to recycle and strengthen current destructive modes. In the next chapter, I show how Brown, McCall and black males in general perpetuate these values through "male-to-male transmission in a tight knit street culture, which leads to smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, sexual conquest, dominance, and crime" (34) The maintenance of such a masculinity becomes a daily chore for black males because they are always on stage. When this type of masculinity is reinforced through the media, it sticks like glue to black male psyche.

Before considering media influence and representation of black masculinity, it's important to note the connection literacy plays in the lives of Douglass, Wright, Brown, and McCall, a design tool that gives them a new conception of masculinity. There autobiographies clearly show the obstacles and confusion black men encounter while constructing their masculinity, but interestingly, literacy becomes a weapon that helps them to move beyond the constrictive boundaries of prescribed masculinity. Sometimes, as these texts have shown, this quest for masculinity leads black males on destructive path of violence against themselves and their community. The male protagonists discussed earlier all attribute their behavior in many ways to a limited world view and experience before literacy becomes apart of their lives. Clearly Douglass's encounter with *The Columbian Orator* gives him the

psychological understanding that there is more to the world than slavery and he is more than just a slave. H.L. Mencken's books and other literary texts show Wright the power of words, and how to use them to express his emotions. Wright himself recognizes that he has lived the perfect novel; now he can use words to tell his pain and triumphs.

Similarly, Brown encounters the power of literacy at Warwick while working for Mrs. Cohen. She senses great potential in Brown despite the fact he is in a detention center, and gives him books about Mary McLeod Bethune, Jackie Robinson, Sugar Ray Robinson, Einstein, and Albert Schweitzer. After reading these texts, especially the African American ones, Brown wants to know things, do things and wonders what might happen if he could get out of Warwick and also from his old life in Harlem (151). For McCall, the literacy link is much more personal, as he connects with Wright's *Native Son* and its protagonist Bigger Thomas: "the book's portrait of Bigger captured all those conflicting feelings—restless anger, hopelessness, a tough façade among blacks and a deep-seated fear of whites—that I'd sensed in myself but was unable to express" (164). Like many black males would be, McCall is surprised that somebody has written a book that so closely reflected his experiences and feelings. The link all the male protagonists make with literacy becomes the foundation on which they

realize access to the American design of individual success and freedom. But many black males have such a limited, confused reality and world view that such opportunities often go unnoticed. Their existence and way of life is etched so deep in their minds it becomes the only possible reality, as this passage from Wright's *Native Son* so passionately explains:

> You're trying to believe in yourself. And every time you try to find a way to live, your own mind stands in the way. You know why that is? It's because others have said you were bad, and they made you live in bad conditions. When a man hears that over and over and looks about him and sees that life is bad, he begins to doubt his own mind. His feelings drag him forward and his mind, full of what others say about him, tells him to go back. The job in getting people to fight and have faith is in making them believe in what life has made them feel, making them feel that their feelings are as good as others'.

Thus Wright sums up the politicization of the black male consciousness.

All the male biographies depict the lived reality of black males' prescriptions for masculinity and their consequences in narrative form, a place where most young blacks hardly venture. But putting the struggle of black men on screen becomes a mixed blessing. In chapter one, I showed briefly how early newspapers and movies depicted the black male as an aggressive beast that needed to be controlled. But what happens when the black male struggle for masculinity becomes a visual reality in hood films? A three prong effect ripples through

American society: such films strengthen society's one-dimensional gaze upon black men as menaces to society, while simultaneously seemingly revealing the negative conditions of common environments of black males. This confirms the racist belief that black men live lives filled with drugs, violence, and poverty; and this sets up the concept of static dysfunctional space. Therefore, the characters characterized by violent actions and delinquent behavior become a confirming photographic slide pf black males, who presumably live the reality of the visual presentation. This is the result of the first wave of hood films *Boyz N' the Hood* (1991), directed by John Singleton and *Menace II Society* (1993), directed by Allen and Albert Hughes.

The realities of these films converged years earlier in the 1965 novel *Manchild in the Promised Land*. However, despite the fact that millions copies were in print, I had never heard of it before taking on this project. Where would black males be if they read about the same violence? However, like many black males, these films claimed my attention over and over again. I argue that these films and other visual depictions of black males visually solidified black male prescriptions. Most of the black male patrons left the theater with confirming power that it was necessary to do whatever one had to do to maintain his reputation, his masculinity, regardless of how much sense it made or who would be wounded or killed in the process. A

moment of masculine glory amongst the home boys is worth any price, even if it means one has to give up his life.

After watching this movie, for the first time in his life, a good friend of mine during our high school days stood up to the bully who teased him because of his small size. My friend should have felt sorry for the bully; however, the pencil he drove into the bully's arm and the fact that he got away with it, made him feel like a bad ass "nigga" in the tenth grade, that is until his parents snatched him back into reality when they heard of the incident during Sunday's service. Many black males didn't have parents like his who recognized the subtleties of black male behavior that needed to be addressed immediately; they had hood films and society in general that glorified lethal black male aggression in the media with very few or veiled alternatives.

John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* attempts to portray the social problems in inner-city Los Angeles through three friends who grow up together in the hood. This movie had wide appeal to white audiences, because rather than focusing exclusively on white racism directed at African Americans, it addressed violence and conflict within the black community (Bogle 344). Some characters in the film find hope for their situation through athletics and other opportunities, but others succumb to their degrading environment while maintaining a code of masculinity.

Hood opens with a group of kids discussing a shooting from a previous night; one of the kids shows the group a dead body which represents the reality of their environment. The major characters are half-brothers Doughboy, Ricky, and Trey. Ricky rests his faith on an athletic scholarship because he is an outstanding athlete. Doughboy follows the code of the street to survive in an environment with no way out. Trey is Ricky's best friend who comes to the neighborhood to live with his father after his mother fails to put him on the right path, or in her words "teach him how to be a man."

I admire the film for the strong disciplinary /teacher/father figure found in Furious, Trey's father. Upon Trey's arrival, Furious sets very strict rules and institutes a host of house duties. These duties become very important to Trey's construction of masculinity because they instill a sense of responsibility and discipline in him. Furious is also the type of father who talks to and explains things to his son. For example, someone breaks into the house on Trey's first night living with his father; his father manages to fire two unsuccessful shots. Trey tells his father he wishes he would had blown the head off the assailant, but Furious informs his son that he would have just been contributing to killing another black man. This statement is simple but has a profound affect on young Trey: it teaches him value of human life.

Furious also spends time alone with Trey, discussing everything from sex to self-respect. These father-to-son-talks help Trey make life-changing decisions during his stay with his dad; these talks are something many black fathers do not instigate. Ellis Cose recalls his psychologist friend, Kirland Vaughan's, revealing comments on this subject: black boys don't have the sense of the world in which their fathers lived. And there is little understanding of each other's life, causing a breakdown of intergenerational empathy and a diminished parental ability to educate" (116). And indeed, in the autobiographies I have discussed, McCall is the only major protagonist who has such discussions with his father. Furious also tries to teach Trey and his friends about gentrification in which property values are driven down, and then the property is purchased and redeveloped by others. Here Furious implies that Black Americans need to own their communities. An older gentleman informs Furious that it's the drugs and crime that have driven the property value down. Then the debate begins on who brought drugs into the black community. Importantly Furious leaves them to think about who benefits from black on black crime.

Unlike Trey, Doughboy and Ricky live with their single mother, who invests her hopes and dreams in Ricky while giving up on Doughboy. At a very young age, he sees his life against the backdrop of a crime-ridden city. Doughboy has no one to set rules or boundaries for him,

so he makes his own. Ricky has a love for football that keeps him focused. Trey watches Doughboy and another one of his friends get taken off to Juvenile Detention. However both *Hood* and *Menace* fail to show a process of evolution in the lives of these three young men during their preteen years, which would have allowed us to recognize early on the consequences of prescribed masculinity. The novels more extended narratives, however, can do this. After Doughboy's arrest, we skip over years, picking up with a coming home party for him when he and his friends are in their late teens, when meeting the prescriptions for masculinity may become deadly.

One of the first prescriptions recognized in the film is the use of verbal intimidation. Simultaneously this verbal play serves as a code among home boys for bonding, but at anytime it can lead to violence against each other. Most of this verbal exchange is known as playing the dozens. Playing the dozens game exemplifies the expressive life style, especially for young black males. "This game prepares them for the socioeconomic problems they may face later and facilitates their search for masculinity, pride, status, social competence, and expressive sexuality" (Majors and Billson 91). This speech environment focuses attention on the performer in both conversational and ceremonial context. According to Abrahams in *Talking Black*, there

are a number of features of Black performance which facilitate this focus:

> First, and most important, is the expectation of verbal play in any encounter, play that goes farther and is much more intense than its nearest Euro-American equivalents. This may be expressed directly, through sounding, or indirectly, in signifying. Sounding commonly occurs in some form of a ritual insult contest, like playing the dozens or capping (West Indian rhyming; more conversationally, it is found as woofing (West Indian giving fatigue) (19).

Another verbal technique is "loud talking." A person is loud when he says something of someone just loud enough for that person to hear, but indirectly, so he cannot properly respond or through indirection by making reference to a person or group not present, in order to start trouble between someone present and the ones who are not (19).

An example of this technique is the famous toast "The Signifying Monkey."

Adherence to masculinity and toughness is often displayed through ritualistic storytelling and accounts of such successfully managing conflict or tight situations (Majors and Billson 92). Abrahams explains this expressive style and its importance to black males:

> These expressions of *stylin'* are played primarily to other males—it is with them that one establishes one's masculinity. Peer-grouping, then, is most often monosexual at this stage and, to a certain degree, remains so throughout life. Friendship is usually more important than any other relationship, with the occasional exception of the mother-child relationship. Peer-grouping is also more important to boys than it is to girls, because boys are permitted more time out of the home, and they learn

quite early in their lives that the ability to endure often stands or falls on how many friends one has on whom one can rely both emotionally and financially. For a male, the ability to endure and to maintain a reputation depends on how extensive are the friendship network he is able to establish and maintain (26)

It is often in learning to *talk shit*, to effectively play with words by *talking that talk*, that the black male's street image will be most firmly established. However, the most important contribution of the dozen games may be as a coping mechanism to help teach black adolescent males how to control their feelings. "Learning how to keep cool, monitor tempers, anger, frustration, pent-up aggression, and other anxieties is crucial in the black world" (Majors and Billsion 101). However, I argue that a visual media depiction of black male aggression has desensitized black males into using violence when one party looses the verbal game.

Midway through the film, Trey is turning out to be a respectable young man who understands that there is more to life than South Central. His mother has finished her masters and wants Trey to return to live with her. The film is to be commended for showing a single black mother striving for a better life and for showing that black parents who are separated can raise a child together, but for the most part Singleton objectifies women as bitches and whores.

Ricky is right on schedule in accomplishing his dreams of receiving an athletic scholarship. The scene with the recruiting agents shows

Singleton's concern for athletes to look beyond the game to academics, when the recruiter asks Ricky what he wants to major in, and informs him how important this is if he gets hurt. But this scene also implies that becoming a pro athlete is the only way to get out of the hood. Meanwhile, Doughboy is in and out of prison and seems to accept that such a routine defines his life; he just lies around and drinks. However the deadly prescriptions of maintaining one's ground changes all their lives forever.

The life changing incident occurs during a night out on the strip on Crenshaw. Ricky is bumped by a guy name Ferris walking down the street; he feels insulted because Ferris fails to say excuse me; each of them tries to hold his ground through verbal intimidation because of the audience that surrounds them. Doughboy pulls his gun and breaks up the dispute for Ferris. His action tips the balance and makes Ferris look like a punk, in Ferris's eyes, in front of his crew. Ferris makes it back to his car, pulls a machine gun from his trunk and shoots in the air to disburse the crowd, trying to regain some ground, but it is still not enough.

This incident, along with police brutality that occurs after the strip incident, persuades Trey to tell his mother he is moving back with her, and he demands that Ricky also leave as soon as possible. Like Caine and his Cousin in *Menace*, driving back from this incident Ricky and

Trey are pulled over by the cops for no apparent reason. Singleton makes a profound statement through the black cop who assumes that Trey and all black men his age are gangsters that need to be eliminated. Here Singleton shows how people make assumptions without getting all the facts, and in cases where young black men do represent all that they fear, they often see the finished product and not the ingredients that produce what some may call America's worst nightmare. Singleton also shows through the cop that prejudice resides in some blacks also. "But by situating hatred of blacks in the character of an African-American cop, he illustrates the institutional embeddness of racism in social institutions and roles, and also classism (Curry and Allison 28).

The nightmare for the three protagonists in *Hood* unfolds while Ricky is on his way back from the store in one of the most powerful gruesome scenes in hood film history. Ferris and his friends spot Ricky and Trey returning from the store. Meanwhile Doughboy, senses something is wrong after seeing Ferris's car circle the neighborhood. Trey and Ricky split up; while Ricky is distracted with a lottery ticket he hears Trey call out to him that Ferris is behind him. Ricky runs only a short piece before the bullets of a double barrel shot gun rips through his legs and chest. Doughboy takes his dead brother home to a mother, who sees all her dreams vanish before her eyes. She blames

Doughboy, as she always did. For the first time, Trey feels angry enough to kill. His father tries to make him realize that a gun won't heal his pain or bring his friend back, but nevertheless Trey plans to participate in the retaliation with Doughboy. But on the way to the confrontation with Ferris, he demands to get out. Because of those discussions with his father, Trey knows that violence is not the answer, and Doughboy in his silence knows that Trey has too much going for him to take part in the revenge. The perpetrators are found at a fast food joint and are gunned down with a machine gun by Doughboy and his friends; for complete satisfaction Doughboy finishes off the now crawling wounded victims with final shots to the chest. These events result from compulsive masculinity, as Doughboy maintains a reputation that has little value in the white masculine design.

While *Hood* focuses on the lived social reality of urban life, *Menace II Society* echoes the senseless violence black males heap on one another. Charles Dutton's message concerning black male aggression is one of the few positive sound bites at the beginning of *Menace II Society*. Despite the fact that filmmakers try to show how the maintenance of masculinity causes senseless violence, it's the depiction of this violence and the macho appeal of supposedly unsympathetic characters that have proved most damaging for young male audiences. This hood film and others inadvertently glamorized

the life of black youth in dangerous neighborhoods and ironically have fueled young black male aggression that is already burning out of control.

Menace begins with a gruesome scene in which O-Dog violently kills two store owners because one of them says he feels sorry for his mother because of the behavior displayed by the young man. The language is as violent as the crime. Caine, O-Dog's friend, innocently watches O kill the owners, but this innocence soon fades as his life merges with the inner city.

First off, *Menace* shows the effects of family life and community on masculinity. Caine watches his father sell drugs and his mother abuse them. One of the most shaping incidents in young Caine's life is watching his father, Tat, shoot a man in cold blood. Tat and some of his friends are playing cards, drinking and doing drugs when Tat asks one of his friends for the money he is owed. The friend responds with verbal intimidation because he does not want to be inferiorized in front of his "boys." Tat for the same reason pulls a gun on his friend to hold his ground in his own house. The friend responds, "I will pay your monkey ass when I feel like it. You better suck my dick." This response is a threat to Tat's masculinity in front of his home boys, his wife, and his son. With no hesitation, Tat protects his masculinity by emptying his gun into the chest of his friends. Little Caine stands

paralyzed in the doorway as the body falls to the floor. It is at this moment that Caine is taught that one must maintain his masculinity at all cost.

Caine's life after the incident is very similar to that of the protagonists in *Manchild*, *Holler*, and in poor black society itself. These visual images reinforce for black males that violence is necessary to hold one's ground. Like so many black males whose opportunities are limited because they are immersed in limited place and space, Caine sells drugs to earn a living but more importantly to participate in the materialistic world that helps create his masculinity, better know as bling bling. With his drug money, he purchases a 5.0 Mustang from a chop shop and car jacks some rims from one of his acquaintances. Later, Caine becomes a victim when some of his peers car jack him and his cousin Harrel. Harrel tries to persuade Caine to get out of the car but he attempts to hold his ground, refusing to give the car up and by slowly pulling a gun from the seat, despite the fact several guns are aimed at him. As a result, Harrel is shot several times, once in the head. He dies on the scene. Caine is also covered in wounds but still lives.

Prescriptions for masculinity dictate that Caine and Harrel's friends must retaliate to restore masculine order among their group. With Al Green's "Love and Happiness" ironically playing on the stereo, Caine,

O-Dog, and the rest of the posse set out to find the perpetrators. Caine is originally concerned about kids and the elderly, which shows he does have a conscience; unlike O-Dog, he has at this point never taken a life. But in a gruesome attack, Caine and his friends shoot their enemies to death in front of a fast food place. Caine's reflection of the incident is very similar to McCall's experience. He feels the same power when he takes a life and "he knew he could do it again if he had to."

Another way the characters maintain masculinity, particular O-Dog, is by showing the tape he took from the robbery. This process is known as "boasting." He boasts to his boys about killing the store owners; they shower him with high fives and other props. Caine spends a week in the hospital recovering from his wounds. He describes O-Dog as America's worst nightmare: young, black, and don't give a fuck. This is the concept the police had when they pulled Caine and his friend over because they were young, black and in a car they assumingly had no way of affording. Then too, Caine was hospitalized because of the beating he receives from police. It's incidents like these with white social institutions that prevent black males from overcoming compulsive masculinity.

Menace does, however, have points of intervention. Caine's grandfather tries to instill in him and O-Dog values about life and why

God put them here.   But O-Dog reminds the grandfather where he lives and what he wakes up to everyday. "Do you care whether you live or die," Caine's grandfather asks him? Profoundly, Caine says he doesn't know. Like many males, life is a day to day struggle; one never has time to think about tomorrow, especially when you live in a community that has no foundation.

After the murders, Caine is reflective about life but the scars from his wounds soon become badges of masculinity. Another intervener, Mr. Butler, one of his friend's fathers tries to offer Caine a way out by persuading him to come to Kansas for a new beginning, a way to survive for the long-term. Ronnie also sees potential in Caine and wants him to accompany her to Atlanta. Caine refuses at first by telling Ronnie that nothing will change if the environment in Atlanta is the same as the one in Watts. And of course, there is much truth to this statement.

Another interesting aspect of *Menace* is that the viewer gets to witness the effect that inner city life has on the next generation of young black males, through Ronnie's son, Anthony. Ronnie is a single mother trying to teach her son appropriate values, despite living among men who define masculinity through toughness and violence. Five-year-old Anthony demonstrates his astuteness when he tells Caine he can whip his ass playing a video boxing game. He is scolded

by his mother and praised by Caine. Caine sees the toughness as a way of survival in the hood, while Ronnie sees it as way to juvenile detention or even to the grave. Caine also makes the mistake of showing Anthony how to hold a gun, pull the trigger, and the correct foul language to use while doing so. To Caine, it is an innocent act but to Ronnie it's a linguistic introduction to drive-bys. Through this simple incident, he has desensitized Anthony to the deadly power of guns, just like much of the media has done today. This desensitization makes even children non-hesitant about pulling the trigger of a gun. How many times have you heard of a kid accidentally shooting one of his peers?

Caine pays a high price for his show of masculinity during one the most common encounters between black men: relationships. Ronnie and Caine become close as they spend time together, close enough for Caine to consider her his girl. During a party Ronnie is hosting, one of Caine's friends, Chauncy, in a drunken state inappropriately grabs her and tries to kiss her. This is something Caine is not going to tolerate in front of his "boys" or his girl, so he pistol whips his friend. Meanwhile Deena informs Caine that she's pregnant. Immediately, he denies the baby is his and hangs up on her. Here other prescriptions for masculinity may are revealed. Caine's masculinity does not allow him to be there for Nina because he will be viewed as weak and

dominated by so called "female problems"; like *Hood* characters, he only thinks of women as "bitches." The use of the word bitch (a sign of black males' evaluation of women as weak and powerlessness, according to Bogle) and other foul language in hood film is authentic in reflecting the reality of the urban environment. Yet, Singleton and other film makers seem unwilling to challenge this perspective (345). The pistol whipped friend's masculinity blinds him to fact that he is at fault for the incident, but compels him to send the video tape of Caine and O-dog to the police. And finally, Deena's cousin's concept of masculinity forces him to avenge the wrong that Caine has committed upon his sister and the beating Caine gave him during an earlier confrontation. While Caine and other friends are helping Ronnie move, Deena's cousin and his crew do a drive by. Caine manages to cover Anthony with his body to prevent harm, but Caine is not spared. This act proves that Caine does care whether he lives or dies, but it is realized too late.

All of the violence in these films occur because of the black males' need to maintain their masculinity and is an accurate reflection of black male youth today. This sense of male honor seems senseless on the surface but when one considers the process of socialization and internalization in the ghetto, it becomes clear that this the only thing the black men have to fight for. The question is what does/did these

images do to the American psyche? To probe the effects of the hood films, one must ascertain who the viewing audience is. During my viewing of these films, sixteen to twenty-five year old males, mostly black, made up the viewing audience. I would also posit that the same group rented the movies after they were released from theaters. The audience is important because both films posit that, in addition to entertainment, they are trying to show the lived reality for some black males. I argue that instead, these films reaffirm for black males living in these conditions that their behavior is appropriate, and confirms for the few whites who may have seen the movies that black males are dangerous and not to be trusted. The people who need to watch the films are blacks and others who do not live in these environments and that play important roles in shaping the community in order to bring about social change and access.

Singleton posits that despite the violence and behavior of black males depicted in the film, there were positive role models found in Furious, a father trying to raise a respectable, successful black man in the hood and Trey his son who grows up against the backdrop of urban violence. Now, at the age of 29, I understand these roles, but as a teenager viewing these films, the most memorable scenes for me were the ones featuring intimidating language, the gruesome cold-blooded murder scenes, and the "infusion of hip hop/rap aesthetics

and sensibility" (Bogle 347).   My friends and I remember that Ricky got slaughtered, not that Trey made it out. This film taught black males my age at the time how to handle situations in a negative way, when it should have taught us how to walk away, how to stay alive. Even if this meant changing the reality of the film, it would have introduced alternative behavior for dealing with situations that could lead to senseless violence.

One doesn't have to wonder why senseless violence broke out at the theaters across the country during the showing of early *Hood* films. Many news critics stressed that rather than promoting violence, *Hood* was an eloquent plea for such violence to end (Bogle 344). However, I agree with other critics who asserted that *Hood* raised the expectation of violence among its impressionable youth audience, especially with the advertising trailer that included almost every instance of gunplay in the film, "rather than emphasize its antiviolence message or the father-son relationship at the films moral center" (Guerrero 182). However, those pleas that the former critics mention are superficial. Most young black males don't remember the foreword or afterword in *Hood* or *Menace*, but they do remember how the characters maintained their masculinity at all cost, regardless of how sensible it may or may not be. "The film's subtle weave of aspirations, frustrations, and violent outburst adds complexity and

occasional contradiction to Singleton's antiviolence message because *Hood* "draws its dramatic visual force from the filmer's insider depiction of gang culture, leaving the character Trey to totally shoulder the burden of the film's moral plea" (Guerrero 184). A strong plea would have a been a community coming together at the end of film with some plan of action to confront the issues facing black males in their community, but in reality, *Hood* ended with hopelessness with Douhboy's profound statement: They don't know, they don't show, or they don't care what's going on in the hood. This did not provide hope or a positive model for me and other young black males who watched this film. I do agree with Guerrero, however, when he argues that *Hood* does show how "homeboys are rewarded or punished by the end of the film for choices and paths consonant with, or in conflict with, dominant values" (186). But black males who do live this life see such punishment as a part of life; such a conclusion does not suggest or offer to black males elbow room to construct an alternate reality or masculine identity.

The other reality is that Hollywood is willing to invest millions of dollars into hood films because the theme of "violence by blacks against blacks, a filmic representation of a real dynamic" (Brigham 28), appeals to young black males and their followers, and such films have low production costs, and the potential for high profits. *Hood*

costs about 6 million dollars to produce but sold almost 60 million dollars worth of tickets (Pacheco 25). Other merchandise and video rentals generates even more revenue. So in short, "art, social criticism and justice do not enter into the capitalist equation which determines whether films made by African Americans are ever released" (93). When this fact is taken into context with the history of black representation on and off the screen, the old adage "same script different cast" becomes apparent where black actors and film makers find themselves trapped within the context of Hollywood economics (Guerrero 164).

The producers, Allen and Albert Hughes, raise some important issues that relate to Black Aesthetics that must be addressed. The Black Aesthetics Movement positioned art not only as a creative artistic process but a production that was connected to and functioned as some moral concept for black Americans. The Hughes brothers argue that the film is a creative project based on potential real life events, but it in no way seeks to make political or social statements on behalf of African-Americans. However when one considers Wallace's powerful notion of spectragraphia, we know that such visual art work does have powerful affects on the psyche. I posit that these films increased black masculine decimation, particularly for younger black males. However, Guerrero suggests that "rather than think of hood

films as the cause "of theater violence [and other influences], we should view them as vehicles through which society's racial contradictions, injustices and failed policies are mediated and as the artist's examination of and dire warning about, a society in which African Americans are, in terms of statistics, worse off today than before the civil rights movements… . "The blame, he continues, resides in the social order in its totality, not the cinematic vehicle that delivers the news" (190). As a black male academic, I agree but how many black males one can assume comes away with such an analysis after watching such films? If they could, they would not be dealing with some of the complex problems they are facing today. Guerrero's comments are well grounded academic interpretations, but he is not privy to the black male mass. Black artists should always be allowed to artistic freedom but because of black peoples' history of continuous struggle in this country; filmmakers should try to use a black aesthetic that is empowering. Would it have been too much to ask of Singleton to show some type of community response to the tragic events?

Also, the continuous breakdown of black family core structures, decreasing parental involvement, and mainstreaming marketing of hip-hop has made the world a very confusing environment for black males trying to construct their masculinity. There are positive films that have debuted showing successful well educated black males dealing with

problems like love and romance, but they have extreme thematics from Hood films because they offer a fantasy environment that is very different from the lives of the males represented in Hood films. Young black males need to see a character surviving in the hood without the use of violence or intimidating language. Trey in *Hood* comes close, but he just seems like a tag along character. We never see him actually surviving. He has a job working at the mall but he is never showed working there; this fact is just mentioned by other characters. With capitalism driving the market place on creativity, hip-hop music, film, and clothing have become very profitable; black parents must take a more intimate approach to raising black men by monitoring their construction of masculinity.

It is this commercialization and perpetuation of the prescriptions of masculinity that have black males locked in a defeating gaze that they imagine as real and positive. In chapter two, I mentioned how during early films blacks were represented in black face by white men who made a mockery of the humanity of black men by playing roles that presented them as mindless thieves. Then, the brute image emerged as this over sexualized beast that lusted after white women, but this was something the black males could use to alter the mindless gaze; it too was detrimental but more empowering. As one looks at the literature of the black male, we see the adoption of the brute image

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early on in the trickster figure and bad man tales, which are filled with foul language and overt sexual images; It was an image that was born in Europe after Europeans first set eyes on some African men who supposedly possessed huge sexual organs; this stereotype was strengthened by scientific propaganda. Thus brute strength and sexuality are the two things that black men could always count on to define their masculinity. These permeated black male culture. As a result, a gaze was created that black males viewed as empowering and some whites viewed as defining most black males.

This duality has always existed. But now this gaze has moved beyond a cultural image to an imagined image, one that is used to make a profit. The cultural image is one that continues to adjust itself based on the changes in society, while an imagined image is only interested in instant gratification. Lacan explains:

> the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze. The subject tries to adapt himself and becomes that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure. (83)

Here I position Lacan to speak to how media images, and images in general, take control of the black male gaze and disrupts it so that the image that is produced is believed to come from his on conscious. Thus, the gaze is most powerful when it is internalized. In essence, the construction of black masculinity has become dependent on

popular cultural images; therefore, most black males don't see themselves consciously as trying to attain a masculine design; rather, they view it as a visual performance that allows them to exhibit the current popular black male pose; even more frightening, some don't even see the need or seriousness to alter their masculine behavior because the imagined gaze has totally masked the cultural gaze. Thus black males have "the illusion of the consciousness of *seeing oneself see oneself* in which [a more empowering] gaze is elided" (83). To prevent the suppression of the more empowering gaze, black cultural must decenter the field of perception that control current constructions of black masculinity, which of course goes far beyond hood films.

Chapter 4: Black Male Bonding: My Nigga, My Brutha, My Luva

For most black men, male bonding plays a critical role in masculine performance. It has become a deep-seated part of the black male's personality and an integral part of the face he shows the world and his black counterparts (Major and Billson 45). Most have been part of a black male group or had black male friends during their early years into adulthood. Even in adulthood, "hanging with the boys" becomes a fundamental experience. It's during the formative years that this bonding experience can become a negative or positive influence on masculine performance and behavior. Through a continued analysis of Wright's *Black Boy*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, this chapter articulates the influence that peer groups have on individual males construction of masculinity and demonstrates how this influence is strengthen by the social and structural communication of the family and the community. That is, how well do the family and community monitor and address issues of masculine behavior that is acted out in the peer group? Also this chapter discusses the struggle some black males face and why they seek an alternative masculinity, which is usually more violent and homophobic, rather than empowering. And finally to show the importance of heterosexuality as defining of masculinity, this chapter,

using James Hardy's *B-Boy Blues,* briefly explores gay black males who are on the "down low," and their struggle to maintain a masculine identity.

Though Wright later in during his teen years feel the influence of a peer group, his construction of a masculine identity is influenced early by men at a bar that he frequents while his mother is at work. At the age of six, these men allow Wright to drink and pay him a nickel to recite vulgar language to women. He runs "from person to person, laughing, hiccoughing, and spewing out filth that made them [the men] bend double with glee (24). With a gang of children, Wright roams the streets, begging pennies from passers-by, haunting the doors of saloons, wandering farther and farther away from home each day. His mother beats him but she soon realizes that more parental control is needed to change Wright's habits. Finally, she places Wright and his brother in the keeping of an elderly black woman who is always aware of their every movement. It is this monitoring that keeps Wright's influences in check, as compared to that of Brown and McCall.

Though there are universal prescriptions that are present at any given point in black male history, some prescriptions are determined by the current climate of social issues in society. For instance, like many black boys, Wright had to pay admittance into his peer group's company by subscribing to certain racial sentiments towards whites

because racism was one of the biggest issues that confronted black males at the crossroads. These sentiments are expressed in many conversations that Wright and his friends have comically but seriously about whites and racism in America: "White folks set on their asses day and night, but leta nigger do something, and they get every bloodhound that was every born and put e'm on his trail" (93). The reality of these discussions played out in the throwing battles between black and white boys of Wright's era who had to deal with their place and space in society

Preteen black male bonding usually focuses on strengthening the camaraderie among other males, while females are relegated to a remote island of life. To be associated with females at this point is a sign of weakness, but later as puberty sets in, those that do not have a girl are viewed as weak. However, it is at this point that female interaction is most important because it may desensitize the hardcore masculinity that develops in boys at this time. Wright explains this masculine development as moral schooling:

> We had somehow caught the spirit of the role of our sex. ..... We spoke boastfully in bass voice; we used the word "nigger" to prove the tough fiber of our feelings; we spouted excessive profanity as a sign of our coming manhood. We pretended callousness toward the injunction of our parents; and we strove to convince one another that our decisions stemmed from ourselves and ourselves alone. Yet, we frantically concealed how dependent we were upon one another. (91)

So here Wright learns the tough language and defiance from his group. If nothing changes, he will approach females in the same fashion which can establish within his consciousness a warped view of female sexuality.

It's no coincidence that Wright's first test at his southern school was not on paper but rather with another boy. Wright has to prove that he can take care of himself and that he is someone worth knowing and being around. This fight is fueled by the chanting crowd, and probably would not have occurred if this crowd was not present because then there would be no reward, no witness to spread the news of the victory, with which establishes his masculine toughness. Here one witnesses how cool pose can be destructive for black males because it is being used to resolve interpersonal conflicts violently:

> To be cool, in terms of presenting one's self as tough, requires that males structure their behavior to give the impression that they are independent, always in control and emotionally detached. Typically [then] adherence to the toughness norm is symbolically displayed by appearing and remaining cool in social situations perceived as potentially threatening to one's self-image or physical safety (W. Oliver 15).

Thus, as one notices and continue to witness in the lives of Brown and McCall, sometimes violence is perceived as the only tool for achieving a sense of masculinity, respect, and status, a "form of social achievement" (G Cazenave, 645).

The need and pressure to be apart of a peer group often forces some black males to create alternate realities for their life. Wright comments on how he conceals his impoverished home life while seeking his peer group's company, never letting them guess how much he is being kept out of the world in which they lived by his female relatives, valuing their casual friendships but "acutely and self-consciously hiding the reality of his life with a quick smile and a ready phrase" (148). He practices this technique during lunch time at school by telling others he is never hungry at noon and simultaneously "swallowing his saliva as he saw them split open loaves of bread and line them with juicy sardines" (148). Such disparity between home life and that of other males often leads one to take drastic measures, as one witnesses in *Promised* and *Holler*.

Often Wright, Brown, and McCall find themselves "embittered by the social wasteland of neglect and isolation created by centuries of second class status and ghettoization" (Majors and Billison 50). However, Wright does find a legal but problematic way of earning money to buy lunch and other materials by selling newspaper supplements; this money makes him more presentable to his peer group. But a black man soon informs him that the supplements distort the image of black people. This is a powerful social lesson for Wright. Socially he learns that some seemingly positive opportunities may

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have negative underlying aspects. He also learns that to survive you have to work hard, and persist, so pushes on to find another job that provides him with funds, which allows him to participate fully with his peers.

Black male bonding and its effects are somewhat limited in Wright's world because the physical movement of black males is regulated by racism. Also the type of masculinity that Wright seeks to participate in is rather harmless compared to that of Brown and McCall. These latter protagonists acquire and perform masculine prescriptions that are life threatening rather than empowering, because of the seemingly vast urban and suburban landscapes in which they live. Their frustration develops out of social and economic neglect of black communities (Major and Billson 50).

At the beginning of *Promised*, Brown's future is on the line as he faces the court for stealing sheets and garments off clothes lines to sell with his gang. All the members of the gang (Turk, Tito, Bucky and others) are frequently sent to detention centers. Brown is placed at the youth house to wait for the bus to Warrick which arrives a few days later; it is here that he thinks back how his childhood friends and companions lead him to this dismal point in his life.

Brown's peer group has so much influence on him because their behavior often goes unchecked by adults, who are too busy making a

living to notice things are going terrible wrong. Danny, a next door neighbor of Brown's, clarifies this when he is entrusted to walk Brown to school.   Instead, he teaches Brown to play hookey and steal sweet potatoes. Brown misses twenty-one school days that year. The constant beatings he receives do not stop his frequent visits to the children center. His peer group takes the place of his family because he can relate to them. They all are daring, tough, dirty, ragged, curse a lot and have a great love for trouble, like him.

Brown like many black males is part of a community that can not hear the cries of its black men. For black males who have been locked out of the "social and economic mainstream, running with a gang can be a form of social achievement" (Major and Billson 50). His mom is too forgiving and tries to understand his delinquent activity; his father is too busy drinking his problems away to teach him how to be a better man. Pimp, his brother, begins performing the same masculinity ten year-old Brown displayed. Brown's father does try to talk to him and give him words of wisdom through the pea and nutshell game. Ten times Brown picks the wrong shell. His father's comment are loaded with a reality that Brown wouldn't learn until later: "that's jis what you been doing' all your life, lookin' for pea that ain't there. And I'm might 'fraid that's how you gon end your whole life, lookin' for that pea" (71). However, the challenge for black males is not finding the pea but

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the right kind of pea and choosing the right path. But politicization never allows for choice, only group commonality. This commonality of urban life is what hood films confirm and what makes them so influential on the black male psyche.

Similar to Wright, Brown also wants to participate in the prescribed masculinity at school. He too only wants money for decent clothes to wear to school, which his father refuses to buy, failing to understand the importance of appearance to teenage males. So Brown sells pot and plays craps with paddy boys for money. Because he lags behind his class counterparts for not attending class and doing his schoolwork and doesn't have an adequate wardrobe, Brown starts to go to school to sell drugs. He spends most of his time at Tito's, whose mother is never home, drinking, smoking pot, and having sex. In his mind, it is just something to do. His dad finds out and kicks him out of the house. Brown voluntarily catches a bus back 'home' to Warwick to the family that understands him. So far Brown and his friend's ages allow them to only be sent to delinquent centers but as they approach their late teens and finally manhood, they find the legal systems treatment of black men is far worse than that of black children.

Peer groups are also very influential on black males' behavior and their view of women. You may recount Johnny's treatment of Clara on

the roof we examined in a previous chapter. Soon after this incident, Brown is given more 'wisdom' on women from Johnny:

> he told us never to beg a bitch for her body. So I listened. I listened to all that stuff he used to tell us about how to pull bitches, how to make them do what you wanted them to do, and how to keep them yours forever. ....It's easy to believe a guy and listen to what he's saying when you see he's doing all the things he's talking about" (111).

This latter statement reveals the powerful influence that negative media images have on black males when there are very few or misguided alternatives. Clearly one can see the damage this view of women has on black culture; however, "through physical enslavement and the current chains and images of psychological enslavement, many Black men are now "fragmented and fractured males characterized by a confused self-concept" (Hill 19). This confusion is the result of the historical images black males have inherited that continues to sabotage many of their efforts for true manhood (Akbar 12).

Violence, next to heterosexuality, becomes the stabilizer for prescribed masculinity but functions in complex and often deadly ways. This prescription is learned by Brown as it is filtered through the lived experience of his group. At the age of ten, Brown recalls joining a group that call themselves the Buccaneers. His memories of this time in his life demonstrate the powerful influence of black male peer groups that go unchecked and challenged:

they adopted me, and they started teaching me things. At that time, they were just the street corner hoodlums, the delinquents, the little teenage gangsters of the future. They were outside of things, but they know the people who were into things, all the older hustlers and the prostitutes, the bootleggers, the pimps, the number runners. They knew the professional thieves, the people who dealt the guns, the stickup artists, and the people that sold reefers. I was learning how to make homemade drugs and how to steal things. I was learning all the things that I need to know in the streets. The main thing I was learning was our code (260).

In *Home Is a Dirty Street*, Useni Perkins describes how the street culture Brown relates to teaches black youth to be men because the street is the one place they can find genuine sympathy to their plight:

the curriculum of this asphalt institution incorporates many of the same courses that are found in the formal school setting. Political science is learned from the unscrupulous exploits of corrupt politicians; history from years of discrimination and economic deprivation; biology from youths smoking marijuana and having sex in dirty alleys; and the physical sciences are taught by learning how to endure elements unfit from human consumption. …[The student's] classroom is his total environment, the alleys, pool halls, taverns, tenements, and the streets on which he lives. By the age of twelve he has usually taken all the required courses which are thrust upon him. His entry into the street culture, as a full-fledged member, is not certified by a diploma but, rather, by his proven ability to operate within the sanctions of his community. Graduation from the Street Institution never comes for most. Instead the black child spends the major portion of his life repeating the same courses, so that by the time he reaches adulthood it is almost impossible for him to change his orientation to life. The ghettocolony child automatically becomes a ghettocolony man (15).

The key reference here is knowledge. Perkins is describing how black male youth is taught the necessary skills to survive in an urban

environment. A formal education does not provide these skills that will later be needed in adulthood. Perkins also shows how Brown, like many black males, feels alienated from societal institutions, particularly high school because of their crude environments. This alienation may have resulted from a lack of money needed to by clothes or school supplies which enable one to gain equal status with his peers, that lack of parental and community monitoring or the more complex issue of other social institutions such as prisons and delinquent centers, and others' failure to address behavior problems adequately and accurately. Black males who lack access or the ability to navigate traditional, legal routes to success are trained by groups like the Buccaneers, "who all have to live for one another" (260).

This bonding pays off by providing Brown with a likely ally during one of his stays at Warwick. Brown establishes the reputation of a "bad nigger," so anyone who can take him down achieves instant masculine fame. The contender's name is Black Joe. He grabs Brown by the collar. Brown is ready to defend himself but a friend that he met earlier in his life, K.B., comes to support him. K.B. is already established at Warwick. In a matter of seconds, he knocks Black Joe to the ground. K.B. makes it clear that Brown is his nigger, and "anybody who fucks wit Brown might as well be fucking with him" (135). This act strengthens the bond between K.B. and Brown but can lead to more

violence if Black Joe seeks revenge. Brown and other black males spend so much time performing masculinity that they avoid more cultural enriching activities that could help expand their personal, social, and political consciousness (Majors and Billsons 45).

Maintaining one's reputation sometimes means that black men may have a hard time being down to earth with each other; they have to be cool and hold their own, especially around the fellas . This duality is exposed during a stay at the youth house for delinquent kids when Toto confronts Brown about his bullying. Brown begins disrespecting Toto's mother. Toto must fight now "because a guy who won't fight when somebody talks about his mother is the worst kind of punk" (61). This fight is necessary in order to protect Toto's reputation within the group and the community despite the fact that Brown is one of his best friends. If Toto does not act in this prescribed way, he will be quickly ostracized and labeled as non-masculine, inviting others to further humiliate him.

This type of behavior exhibited by the males relates to the thug image, an image that blends cool and toughness. But more troubling, it disrupts and overshadows the brotherly love they have for each other. This image in some instances affords black males like Toto and Brown some measure of protection when walking the streets late at night in their environments, but the image also carries " a set of

connotations—self-fulfilling prognoses—not a lot of which are either flattering or life preserving" (Cose 5), and the associations produced are likely to get thuggish black males tossed out of restaurants, refused admittance to stores and pulled over by the police, derailing access to the white masculine design. However some black males see their behavior consequential only in the instances that it happens; therefore, they fail to realize "there associated expectations foretell a future circumscribed by the limits of someone else's imagination, those self-fulfilling prophecies that will have them [hustling] for pennies instead of reaching for greatness (4).

At a delinquent institution called Warrick, one is informed how premeditated brutality helps maintain one's masculinity. This is especially relevant to the guys who are afraid somebody would think they were homosexuals. Brown relates how these guys would stab other males or hit them in the head with something while they were asleep to establish themselves as brute men who could never be homosexual, even if they were. Black males are able to survive in Warrick because of the urban lessons they learned on the street. One had to retaliate for any offense, according to Brown, to prevent future attacks:

> Don't mess with a man's money, his woman, or his manhood. This was what gang fights were all about. If somebody messed with your brother, you could just punch him in his mouth, and this was all right. But if anybody

was to mess with your sister, you had to really fuck him up—break his leg or stab him in the eye with an ice pick, something vicious (255).

The maintenance of masculinity overrules the adage "that it's better to walk away sometimes because the [psychological] identity of masculinity is being preserved (Madhubuti 17). Brown recalls being beaten up by a group of boys when he refused to give them his quarter, leaving him with a bloody nose. An adult eventually warns the boys off. Brown's concern is not his bloody nose but the fact that he still has his quarter. His ability to keep the money symbolizes his manhood, his principles.

As Brown grows older, he can not escape the hold-your-own-mentality. He feels soon he would have to kill someone like Rock, Bubba Williams, or Dewdrop, to keep up his reputation, to become a "bad nigger." This meant that if you were going to be respected in Harlem, you had to be a "bad nigger"; and if you were going to be a "bad nigger," you had to be ready to die" (122). To maintain your street membership, there are certain things you have to do, according to Brown: "You had to get in this thing with the whores, and sooner or later you had to use drugs, and sooner or later you had to shoot somebody" (122). Brown's behavior is what Mancin calls "strategic styles." These styles are distinct coping characteristics that black males may use to manage social, family, and environmental pressures.

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Brown isn't ready to do any of these things but the alternative is to participate in the white mainstream, a place where he is treated like an object no matter how hard he works, a place where he is socially alienated. During Wright's time, fist fighting ruled the day, but in Brown's guns were beginning to filter into the black community and are used as weapons of masculinity; their victims would not get the chance to fight another day.

We see that fighting is used as a last resort prescription during the early training in the maintenance in black masculinity, but eventually a prelude to a much more deadly requirement: drugs. Brown comments on how by 1957 the fight thing had gone out and drugs flooded the black community. This is the poison dagger that makes achieving prescribed masculinity lethal. Initially drugs become another prescription for masculinity, but users of drugs eventually dilute any masculine identity they have attained. Even more destructively, drugs provide an economic vortex that allow black males partial access to the hegemonic design because now they can afford the nice clothes, cars, and apartments necessary to perform prescribed masculinity. However black males pay a high price for this type of access, because it places them in direct competition with each other. This access must be protected at all cost. It is at this point that the

handgun becomes an essential signifier for "business" for the black male psyche.

When one takes the dynamics of the prescriptions I have discussed so far, especially the tough, vulgar language and ability to fight over any cause, one recognizes the extensive danger black males face while achieving prescribed masculinity. If one adds to this the ways in which the media has disrupted the black male image and has popularized such negative forms of black masculine performance, it becomes clear why black males are in terrible trouble, why they are killing each other, and why so many end up in prison. The economic lure of drugs makes black males unaware of the fact that they may have money and its materialistic counter parts, but they don't have an empowering identity. The dream they are living, at any moment, can turn into a nightmare or end in death. Hill attributes the problems of black males to what he calls "the western male seasoning process" which has placed black males at risk (29). "The process is related to machoism and a privileged sex image that psychologically cripples black males' access to a more empowering masculine design" (29). In other words, the sexual objectification of the black male body since slavery has ripped the very fabric of black masculinity.

In McCall's *Holler*, one finds that black male bonding becomes more refined in its training in comparison to Wright and Brown.

However, in *Holler*, one is able to witness the early effects of black male bonding before the training becomes detrimental to the individual. Early in the novel, one finds McCall admiring what he calls the cool boys in high school as "they dragged long and hard on cigarettes in the boy's bathroom and ceremoniously passed them among themselves while constantly cuffing their crotches. They always have the finest girls, never come to class, and can beat up anybody. McCall is captivated:

> they seemed to have all the self confidence I lack. I was into honor rolls and spelling bees. They were into sock hops and talent shows. I looked all neat and boring, like mama dressed me for school. They wore their hats backward and left their belt buckles unfastened, shoe laces untied, [and sagged their pants] (26).

Here again one witnesses how some black youth turn to peers for confirmation. "The more academic and social failures accumulate in the school setting, the more absorbed and competent they become in the peer setting" (Majors and Gordon 222). McCall admires these prescriptions but feels his current masculine stance is unacceptable at this point. If McCall does not have reinforcement at home that guide and assures him that spellings bees, dressing and talking respectable is an appropriate masculine stance, he will envy and emulate the peer group behavior that he seeks to be apart of. This "cool behavior" that McCall seeks is critical to the black male's emerging identity as he develops a distinct style. McCall at this young age feels the need to

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break into the social scene he witnesses or risk being victimized in some way by it. According to Glasgow, young males must prescribe to certain "subcultural expectations for behavior because his developing sense of dignity, confidence, and worth depend on it" (13).

The larger the peer group, the more possibilities for delinquent activity. Most of McCall friends consist of young boys from his neighborhood "that started out as a loosely knit groups of restless adolescents who shared a passion for sandlot sport" (34). They form ties playing football, basketball, and baseball, but continue their friendships off the field. This hanging out together solidifies the bond of black males and gives them power and confidence to participate in delinquent activity. McCall recounts how he and his friends in the eighth grade throw spitballs, pinch girls butts in class, and trip people while they walked down the hall. This is harmless activity that can easily be addressed by watchful administrators and parents. But McCall's parents, like many, are too busy working and making living to offer correction and administrators are too quick to abruptly suspend rather than deal with the subtle but damaging changes that are taking place in McCall and his friends. McCall makes clear what this group provides for him:

> I discovered strength and solace in camaraderie. It was a confidence booster, a steady support for my fragile self-esteem. Alone, I was afraid of the world and insecure. But I felt cockier and surer of myself when hanging with my

boys. I think we all felt more courageous when we hung together. We did things in groups that we'd never try alone. ….There was no fear of standing out, feeling vulnerable, exiled, and exposed. That was a comfort even my family couldn't provide" (35).

As the peer group places a tighter control on McCall and his friends' individuality, the purpose of school changes completely: it becomes more like a social arena rather than focusing on getting education. The academic rigors lose their luster and the reward of making the honor roll just isn't the same: "I felt too self-conscious to join in class discussions. I sat in the back of the room with the hard dudes laughing and playing" (35). It is at this point that black males find themselves expelled more and more often, further putting out flames of hope. Parents begin to wonder why their children can't seem to stay in school, and begin to punish and yell at them without talking and finding solutions, further alienating themselves from their children and strengthening the power of the peer group. The boundaries at school, however, do limit the amount of delinquent activities of peer groups but summer vacation makes way for more disruptive behavior.

McCall spends the summer with his peer group having parties at his friend's house, whose parents are not home, in a community that has its eyes closed to the trouble brewing in these boys who will one day become men. Like Brown, McCall steals from a store, but is caught and taken to the police station to wait for his stepfather. He is beaten

with a belt and placed on probation, but such actions are often ineffective if the root of the problem is not found. McCall's parents, like many, do not understand. They make sure he is clothed, fed, and protected, but they do not hold conversations, and love is understood rather than expressed. They fail to understand that his stealing has nothing to do with him being hungry and poor; " it was another hanging rite, a challenge to take something from somebody else and get away clean" (38).

One has already witnessed Brown's introduction to sex and women, but McCall's 101 classes with his peer group reveals how and why heterosexuality is the ultimate prescription for masculinity. Nutbrain, his first mentor, commands big respect on the block by virtue of his status as an established lover who conquers women for sport. Everything from masturbation to oral sex is described in vulgar terms, even the whole intent of sex. These corner lessons take place often and help shape McCall's view about women, love, and sex. Nutbrain influences him to believe that the pursuit of women is a macho game,   and the object is to "get the pussy" without giving love; men that loved were called "pussy-whipped" (42). A pussy whipped man, by the group's standard, has no control of masculinity and exposes all his feelings, which makes him weak, vulnerable.

McCall leaves the street corner class with knowledge of two types of females:

> "there were women , such as your mother, sister, and teacher, and there were bitches and 'hos, all females who didn't fall into that first category. Bitches and 'hos were somebody else's mother or sister or daughter. As long as they weren't your relatives or the relatives of a hanging buddy, they were fair game" (42).

Clearly one can notice the damage that is done to the black male psyche by these peer groups. When you add the effects of hip-hop music videos and Hollywood movies about black men and women and how they treat each other, it's not surprising that many black boys have to be deconstructed and re-taught how to respect black women, themselves, and their fellow blacks.

Now that McCall, at the age of thirteen, has the 411 on sex and women, he feels pressured by all the bravado around him to get some conquests literally under his belt. Eventually, he does. This early exposure to sex that McCall and his friends have makes them seemingly invincible, because now they feel really grown, complete; they feel like men. Soon they start running trains on girls. These trains are not viewed as rape but "as a social thing among hanging partners, like passing a joint" (44). The person who sets up the train got pats on the back and points added to his rep. For McCall and his friends, the train functions as their "normative sexual socialization pattern of sex-role identity" (Brathwaite 87). Both Brown and McCall is

taught to evaluate each other according to the prescribed masculine model that warps their view of black female sexuality.

McCall's first train demonstrates the overpowering force of the peer group. He is called by his friend Lep to meet him at Turkey Buzzard's house to train a girl Buzzard has tricked over. McCall looks at the girl and feels sorry for her. He wants to reach out and do what they all know is instinctively right: walk her home and apologize for their temporary lapse of sanity" (45). But when cool behavior is placed "ahead of acknowledging and dealing with true needs and fears, they contribute to one of the more complex problems in the black community today: black-on-black crime" (Majors and Billson 19). But this is the first train for the group, and if he comes to the girl's defense, they would accuse him of falling in love, being a punk. His reputation would be destroyed. McCall keeps these feelings to himself and waits for his turn to conquer. This event solidifies the groups' camaraderie and identity:

> The train on Vanessa was definitely a turning point for most of us. We weren't aware of what it symbolized at the time, but that train marked our real coming together as a gang. It certified us as a group of hanging partners who would do anything and everything together. It sealed our bond in the same way some other guys consummated their alliances by rumbling together in gang wars against downtown boys. In so doing, we served notice—mostly to ourselves—that we were a group of up-and-coming young cats with a distinct identity in a specific portion of Cavalier Manor that we intended to take out as our own (49).

So at the expense of young black women who have their own problems to conquer, McCall and his friends show the other guys how cold and hard they are. They run many trains at each others' houses while parents and their community only see a group of boys innocently hanging out.

As Brown predicted earlier, guns become a must have tool in the arsenal of the peer group. It becomes very important to McCall's group when they confront the Cherry Boys who start coming to their bus stop to talk to their girls. They are in the wrong territory. McCall carries the gun when they confront the other group. They clearly outnumber the Cherry Boys and begin beating them. McCall thrusts the gun up against the temple of one the boys. He feels like a god, and he has an audience of fifty mesmerized school kids watching so he performs his crazy nigger act: "make a move, motherfucka, I'm gonna blow you away!" (67) Afterward the boys leave in defeat; the ear-pierced ear, gold-toothed McCall and his friends celebrate the triumph of their first real throw down. They are riding high on the horse of prescribed masculinity; they had all its components.

As in the hood films, these senseless battles cause a boomerang effect. The defeated group always retaliates to reestablish their own reputations. The Cherry Boys regroup and return to Cavalier Boulevard and find McCall alone. They jump him, but he escapes. McCall calls his

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backup but most of them are conveniently unavailable, except for Shane and Shell Shock. Walking in silence, the three confront the Cherry Boys, now thirty strong. Reality hits McCall as he gets closer; he longs for the world of the spelling bees:

> all of sudden, I didn't want to be rock hard anymore. I would have given anything to be a regular schoolboy, a no-name lame with no rep to defend; to go to school and do my class work; to have the freedom to be scared, unbound by false bravado. But I'd crossed the line and was compelled by teenage illogic to go all the way. So I walked toward my crucifixion (69).

This reflection shows that it's not too late for McCall to break away from the peer group; he experienced life without it, but those who never experience spelling bees or had McCall's stable but often unaware family life, would never have such reflections. McCall and his friends take a few weeks to recover from their beating. Rather than proving to McCall and his friends that such behavior is senseless and life threatening, it only proves that the pledge he and his friends make while hanging together to back each other up is mostly talk, and that he needs something else; he needed a piece, a gun. It's a gun that seals his fate during a robbery of a local McDonalds; No one was hurt, but McCall is no longer a minor. He is a young black male growing up in America.

The power of peer groups has been thoroughly explored, but in order to clearly reveal the struggles for prescribed masculinity and the

restrictions it places on black males, one must examine black male homosexuality, particularly black males who are in the closet or living on the "down low." My concern with homosexuality is with the debilitating affect that prescribed masculinity and heterosexuality that prevent D.L. homosexuals and the black community in general from embracing and recognizing this identity because of social alienation, racism, and homophobia.

To witness the defined tensions of homosexuality and the maintenance of prescribed masculinity, one only need to scroll through gay personal ads as I've done many to times to asses this part of the project. Here is a typical "DL" ad verbatim:

> Sup peeps, you have a sexyazznig here who is what you have been waiting for. I am 6'1 185, bald, stach, goatee and a great personality. I am looking for a bottom/ vers MASCULINE man. I am a top and will treat you the way you deserve to be treated. I am a very passionate man, who will kiss you, hold you, love you very passionately. I am STRONG, but tender too. If you are not REAL, Please don't hit me. i am looking for a real man , one who is serious and you MUST be MASCULINE!!!!. If you don't have a pic, you don't need to holla. Hope to hear from you, just be a man about it! Looking for friends from all over, so holla! Will be in New Orleans only for a min yo! (ebonymale.com)

This ad reveals and conjures a lot of questions about black male homosexuality, but here I focus on the maintenance of masculinity. Notice how the ad poster situates his masculinity with his physical description; sometimes the ad is accompanied by a blurred picture as

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this one is. He also clearly states that he is a "masculine" man; others use "straight acting," "DL man," or "bisexual." All of these identities negate complete homosexuality by maintaining a connection with heterosexuality, leading to masculinity. The ad also makes clear that he is also looking for someone who fits one of the descriptives he himself embodies. Some ads further state "no punks, faggots or feminine guys." These descriptives may expose the identity of "DL" men while in the public sphere. Also these latter descriptives denote some form of femininity, which may be reflected in terms of dress (loud colors, tight clothes), talk (high pitch voice, smacking of lips, use of drag queen language), performance, (twisting while walking, moving of hands and head in a feminine manner), and the physical (hairstyles that suggest femininity, or feminine products such as lip gloss or clear finger nail polish).

These feminine qualities are examples that James Baldwin interrogates by the kinds of questions he poses about the making of certain identities: "people invent categories in order to feel safe; white people invented black people to give identity and 'straight' cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves" (88). Without the pressure of feminine features, DL men create a safe conscious space to sleep with other men without the stigmas. This space reminds me of Cora Kaplan's reading of

Giovannni's Room as she attempts to make sense of "the cultural and psychic fear at the heart of homophobia, a panic that Baldwin must productively situates within homosexual desire and, more problematically, in relation to an idealized homoerotic masculinity [that may shatter prescribed masculinity]" (39). In other words, most DL men are looking for other gay men who have all the components of prescribed masculinity in order to create this physical and psychic projection of a perceived heterosexual identity.

This very descriptive DL formula for black gay DL men develops because of the stereotypical feminization of homosexuality and the tendency to associate homosexuality with white men. This view is partly due to one-side media exposure and production. When the news covers gay events, they usually focus on gay pride events and the most outlandish gay participants, usually drag queens, transvestites, and transsexuals. All the gay TV shows and movies focus on white men and maybe a very feminine acting black man, but none come close to representing the masculinity of many gay black men, who are still trying to be recognized as men, let alone gay. To further borrow from Kaplan, these images "crystallize a whole nexus of fear and prejudices [within the black male psyche and disturbs the] primordial order of men and women; a distinction—biological, social, and psychic-that may secure an empowering sexuality" but with disgust (45).

These images also make black and gay identity hostile to one another, which in turn creates homophobia, hypermasculinity, and prescribed masculinity (Thomas 61). Gay white men have formed many organizations that have allowed them to break down barriers in their community while black men are left to dwell in the abyss deep within their communities and culture while other battles are being fought.

In James Early Hardy's novel *B-Boy Blues*, Mitch briefly but profoundly comments on the racial bias that is present in some Lesbian and Gay organizations that are predominately white by choice. Mitch recalls running for office in some of the gay and lesbian groups he volunteered for "but was told both directly and indirectly, that in order to get white support, [he] couldn't be " too black" and [he would] have to find [himself] a white boyfriend (80). Hardy, through the character of Raheim, confronts these social issues and the homosexual man who must wear the mask of prescribed masculinity and heterosexuality. For black gay men, it's like double social alienation for being black and gay, and trying to be a man. I believe the jargon of prescribed masculinity and racial authenticity has had debilitating consequences for Black American sexual politics. Kendall Thomas asserts that the "homophobia and virulent masculinism that underwrite the politics of racial authenticity in the current conjuncture are best understood as the displaced expression of internalized racism,

which is in turn a symptom of a sexual alienation among black Americans of epidemic proportions" (61). This displacement is the result of black cultural and social institutions that specialize in double-edge politics of division, as Eldrige Cleaver does in *Soul on Ice* in reference to homosexuals:

> The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams. It seems that many Negro homosexuals…are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man (102).

According to Rudolph Byrd, "by posting homosexuality as a discredited sexuality incompatible with Black manhood and corrosive of the goals of black revolution, Cleaver traduced and legitimized homophobia in Black public discourse" (17). As a result of this shift, masculinity becomes prescriptive, self-inflictive and emasculating.

Raheim epitomizes what the ad placer is looking for, a B-Boy. Notice that the B-Boy is identical to the young males discussed earlier in *Holler* and *Manchild.* Due to the in-depth definition that Hardy provides and its importance to masculinity, I'm quoting a rather lengthy section from this novel concerning "B-Boyz":

> They are the boyz who stand on street corners, doin' their own vogue—striking that "cool pose" against a pole, a storefront, up against or on a car, laning', loungin', and loitering' with their boyz, just holding court like a king with a "40" to quench the thirst, tryin' to rap to the females, and daring anyone to stake their territory, to invade their domain. ….They are the boyz who dress to thrill. Their

heads—clean, close-cropped, or in a funky fade—are wrapped in bandanas scarves, stocking caps, or sports caps, which are usually worn front, tilted downward, loose, or backwards on the head for full effect. They style and profile in their baggy jeans or pants falling somewhere between their waists and knees, barely holding onto their behinds, their under gear pulled up over their waists. They kick the pavement in sidewalk-stompin' boots and low-and hightop, high-priced sneakers oftentimes worn loose, unlaced, or open, with their trousers tucked inside. ... They are the boyz who, whether they are in motion or standing, are always clutching their crotches. In fact, it seems like their hands are surgically attached to their dicks, as if they are holding it in place and fear it will fall off. They are the boyz who are walking stereotypes, walking statistics for commentators, forecasters, academicians, and politicians to discuss and dissect, to berate and blast, to write about and write off. They are the boyz whose main challenge in life is to gain or sustain props (that's respect) (B-Boy 25-26).

In other words, B-Boy defines what Billson and Majors refer to as cool pose; they are consummate performers, who happen to be gay. Notice they meet all the prescriptions that Brown and McCall try to attain except for their sexual identity. The lengthy description serves as example of the social conditioning of [black masculinity] and can be seen as a type of aversion therapy against homosexuality (Hoch 80). A black DL gay man must personify prescribed masculinity. So being a B-Boy or performing what Hardy refers to as Banjeeness becomes " a boyz2men rite-of life for many preteen/post teen males" (Hardy 26) because such performance gives off an overtly straight vibe. According to Hardy, for many black heterosexuals, there is no such

thing as a straight acting homosexual, and most would faint at even suggesting that a B-boy could be gay (26).

One finds the consummate performers of masculinity in hip-hop culture. The culture itself sometimes manufacture and promote negative black male behavior. Master P, DMX, Snopp Doggy Dogg, Ice Cube, Canibus, Common, the late Eazy-E, and, interestingly enough, Public Enemy, rap fast and hard about the faggots they want to waste or man-to-man parts that don't fit. For example the following lyrics from "Plan B" by Master P tries to pull off that he's referring to his lady friend as his "nigga":

> My homies call you that nigga
> But you my bitch
> Since we banging, I guess we one click
> You be that nigga that I drink with
> And you don't even trip if i was to let a freak kiss
> You give me rubbers so I can stay strapped
> You say you can't catch no fucking rat
> Without a mouse trap
> So we be kicking it like g's
> Its a drought, but you got a connect on some keys
> You roll up the ?? and drink 40s'
> You'll whoop any bitch at any ghetto party
> We walk past security cause you got the strap
> And when my homies see ya
> You the only female they give dap
> You the only nigga that I'll kiss
> Make love to and still do some gangsta shit with
> Like Menace to Society we kick it
> I'm Kane, you my thug like Ms Jada Pinkett (Master P)

Then to solidify the claim, the female rapper Mia X adds the final touch, which stamps out any indication of homosexuality:

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I lays back and chill
Why you ills with the hotties
I'm numero uno in your eyes honey poppi
Yo lady Gotti
Thugged out, hooriding ready to kill
Yet make me feel like others can't with my sex appeal
Be riding ghetto thrills
But still the bitch behind the trigger
The bitch about her scrilla
The bitch to smack her nigga
If the tone faintly rises in his voice
The choice is mine
When it comes to haters living or dying
Blueprinted crimes illustrated by your baby
The unlady like mistress
Be all about illicit business (Master P)

According Steven G. Fullwood, "the black heterosexual imagination is as deep as any ocean and often fraught with a schizophrenic mixture of homophobia on the one hand and homoeroticism on the other."

Hip-hop culture also informs other prescriptions like materialism and the sexual objectification of black women that sometimes fuel negative attitudes like these lyrics from the group Cash Money Millionaires:

It's the nigga with tha Lex bubble
Candy coated helicopter with tha leather cover
If ya suckin' not fuckin' take off the rubber
Then toss that bitch nigga cause I don't love her
Balla, Manny bought a private plane
Then turned around and sold that bitch to Juve and Wayne
They put 30 inch lorenzos on that thang man
I know you niggaz out there just don't understand

I'm a 1999 driver
I'm a uptown third ward magnolia T.C. driver

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Ole ignorant ass always touchin
Big ballin ass nigga you can see him when he comin
Booted up, diamond up
Golds be shinnin' up
Muthafuckas be blindin' up
Niggas at the second line be sayin, "I'll be damned"
Up in they best fits sayin, "Juve got me damn"

I be that nigga with the ice on me
If it cost less than twenty it don't look right on me
I stay flossed out all through the week
My money long if you don't know I'm the B.G.
I be fuckin niggaz bitches all in they home
Niggaz be like, "Look at that Benz on all that chrome"
Diamonds worn by everybody thats in my click
Man I got the price of a mansion 'round my neck and wrist
My nigga Baby gettin' a special built machine
A Mercedes Benz 700 B-14
I know you niggaz can't believe that
I can't wait to see ya haters face when ya see that
Man look at that
Niggaz wear shades just to stand on side of me
Folks say take that chain off boy ya blindin me
All day my phone ringin bling bling bling
Can see my earring from a mile bling bling

The cars, clothes, and jewelry are all part a masculine performance that the novels here speak to. Because of its visual depiction in videos, it's even given more power, so much power that "Bling" has it own place in the dictionary. And it's bad enough that black women are treated as just an accessory to be used and abused expressed in the words, but when they too appear in videos, it becomes a divisive critical situation that both black men and women must address.

I also concur with Hardy when he states that "the general rule is that, even if there are homosexuals in the black community, most

blacks think there shouldn't be, and those willing to acknowledge that black gay men do exist feel comfortable with them only as flaming faggots, which returns to the notion of sexual alienation. Therefore, most gay black men who live a "DL" life style perform prescribed masculinity to hold on what little masculinity society and their culture affords them, regardless of how negative and limited it can be. There are further limitations within the black community because of the reluctance and slowness of the leadership of Black churches, and social and cultural organizations to publicly and systematically address homophobia and reduce it to a private matter when indeed it is very much a political and social one" (Byrd 19).

Mitch dreams of finding a B-boy, but only for sexual adventures; however, he doesn't anticipate that underneath Raheim's hard exterior is a man who wants and needs to be loved. Through Mitch's first B-boy, Royal, however, Hardy show's how some B-boys maintain a masculine and heterosexual identity while being intimate with other men. According to Hardy, some B-Boyz have very strict rules that must be followed he tells us of Mitch's encounter with Royal: "Some B-boyz like Royal (and non-B-Boys) definitely see a difference between fucking a man (which for some constitutes "fooling around" or "getting off") and kissing (which some save for the females or don't do it at all). For them, you ain't a real man if you kiss another" (35) Here,

Royal, by not participating in kissing, which is deemed a very intimate act, tries to deconstruct the experience into a physical experience that leaves him unconnected to the reality of the experience. This type of surmising allows him to refute an exclusively gay identity and allows room for other signifiers like: straight acting, bisexual, bicurious, and trade (a straight male that sleeps with men). Hoch's comment brings clarity to these signifiers:

> the male role today is often defined, not so much by its positive attributes as by its non effeteness: a "real man" is one who is least open to the charge of homosexuality. Since effeteness, like impotence, is seen as a kind of 'neuterisation' of the masculinised consciousness (or is understood as its subversion by the feminine elements repressed into the unconscious), the masculinity of non-effeteness is in many ways a special case of masculinity seen as a defense against [homosexuality]" (Hoch 80).

So all the signifiers listed allow Royal the appearance of prescribed masculinity that protects him from social and sexual alienation because in the black community homosexuality is incompatible with Black manhood and Black liberation.

Finally Mitch meets Raheim at a local hangout but they find they are from two different worlds. Raheim grew up without a father in an urban environment very similar to that of Brown and McCall. He also fathers a child during his early teens and quits school to support the child. Unlike McCall, however, Raheim doesn't have any qualms about raising a black male child.

Only his friends have any idea of his sexual orientation, but they all are B-boys also, so the mask is impenetrable to the naked eye. Mitch, on the other hand, is from a two parent home. He is partially raised by his stepfather because his father dies early in his life. For the most part, Mitch's community was very calm and peaceful during his teen years. Unlike Raheim, Mitch is not really part of a group that forces a prescribed masculinity on him; therefore, he develops his own distinct masculinity. His mother embraces his sexuality; his stepfather doesn't understand it but tolerates it. All of Mitch's friends are similar to him and the exact opposite of B-Boys. One can infer, against the standards of prescribed masculinity, that some of them have touches of feminine accents because of the way they talk and mingle with one another.

A rift in the friendship opens when Mitch asks Raheim to invite his friends over. Raheim is very uncomfortable with this idea because Mitch is not exactly B-boy material, but he goes along. Upon Raheim and his friends D.C. and Angel's arrival, one can notice all the prescriptions of masculinity: the vulgar street language ("Yo close the do' nigga!" "Shut up, nigga!" Yo, dis negihbahood betta be cool, cuz if somebody fucks with my shit, I'ma haft clock em), the B-boy clothes (cap, muscle shirt, hightop sneakers and silver hoops in their ears, other bling bling jewlry) and of course the performance of crotch grabbing and high fives. However, Mitch is surprised that Raheim

kisses him in front of D.C. and Angel, but he forgets that it is not in public and Raheim's friends are also B-boyz. However, Raheim never invites Mitch to hang out with them in public. Clearly Mitch feels uncomfortable and in actuality is more like a servant at his own house rather than a participant, as they watch the game and converse. He only makes an appearance to offer them drinks and burgers he prepares while they play the dozens.

Because of his outspokenness and more formal educational background, Mitch makes the mistake of commenting on their use of the word "nigga" and how he did not like to be referred to as one. This is the bonding word for B-boys and most young black male peer groups and to them it means something totally different then "nigger."

To digress briefly, there has been debate over the destructiveness and empowerment of the word "nigger." Randall Kennedy calls it the nuclear bomb of racial epithets and shows how blacks are losing their ability to censor it because of its assimilation into other cultures. For instance some white urban youths, use the N-word to refer to their friends as being hip and showing coolness. Norman Mailer's essay, *The White Negro* explores whites' fascinations with black culture because their art was the art of the primitive, the exotic. But to Ellis Cose to reduce black culture to primitive "reduces black people to the status of unthinking, violent, primal creatures, with their animal urges

unrestrained by civilization" (52) This unrestrained quality supposedly accounts for how blacks supposedly keep it real, but while white youths participate in this so-called phenomenon, they can at any time easily shed their black identity whenever they tire of the charade, some black youth have taken on this essences as their true identity. (53)

James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time,* writes that "you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger" (32). Baldwin observes how some whites were trapped in a history which they could not understand and be released from; therefore, they had to believe that white men were superior to black men (27). Cose uses the same analogy to say that the N-word has trapped black males

> that wallow in the stereotype and call the practice keeping it real when the so-called reality they cling too (that black men are sex-obsessed, strutting sticks of macho dynamite, brimming with street sense, devoid of intellect, driven only by desire) is nothing but a tragic myth rooted in a time when [some] Americans, in order to feel good about themselves, needed to believe that black men were something vile, something disgusting, something inhumanly strange" (13)

Indeed, the strange career of this troublesome word rings clear.

Of course, the N-word is not discussed in this context, but needless to say this confrontation ends the party and Mitch realizes that he can never be a B-boy because his experience has socialized him in a

different way. Mitch shares with his co-worker how Raheim speaks and boasts the way he does around his friends. Raheim never behaves this way when he's alone with Mitch. However, Mitch fails to realize the Raheim has nothing to prove to him because for one he is more masculine than he is and is only with him at all gay events. D.C. and Angel are his homies and each of them must perform the masculine script to perfection if they are going to pass as masculine men in their world. Because they are gay, this performance takes places in most all male institutions such taverns, poolrooms, stadiums or any where large groups of males hang out. According to Hoch, the high level of violence that characterizes most of these all-male institutions is attributable to the vicious circular aspects of the struggle against effeminacy; the more one retreats to an all-male environment, presumably the greater the homosexual temptation, and hence the continued need to "up the ante" in the way of violence to prove one's manhood (85). So it is not surprising that Wright fight on his first day of school, that Brown and his friend must beat each other or that McCall must shoot another black male for disrespecting his girl friend.

Critic Rudolph Byrd sums up the reality and consequences of prescribe masculinity in the black community:

> The uncritical acceptance of orthodox conceptions of gender and sexuality and the attending practice of emasculating forms of masculinity are our new traps. They are, to conjure another familiar image in African American

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folklore, the new tar baby to which we have been stuck for far too long. Many African American men have been uncritical in our acceptance of certain male and heterosexual privileges. This lack of a deeper political consciousness, this failure to critique and contest apparently widely held assumptions that foster the growth of traps of sexism and homophobia have produced injuries, both psychic and physical, among those of us who are not only excluded from the attainment of these privileges, but who also recognize that privileges are potential traps (20).

Byrd is calling for a new sexual revolution that disrupts the ideologies of sexism and homophobia in order to reclaim a more empowering masculinity. However, this project demonstrates that this reconstructing of masculinity is a difficult task because it is woven so deeply into the very fabric of black masculinity; one only needs to look at music, television, clothing and the politics and expression of masculinity that these produce to see its power. For many of today's black males, the creation of a masculine physical image is much more powerful than the spiritual one, which is desperately needed.

Chapter 5: Toward a Conclusion: Masculinity Unleashed

Indeed, power, money, and sex(uality) is the essence of this new, and sometimes, destructive masculinity that some urban black males use to gain access to the masculine design. Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool" echoes this destructiveness:

> THE POOL PLAYERS.
> SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.
>
> We real cool. We
> Left school. We
>
> Lurk late. We
> Strike straight. We
>
> Sing sin. We
> Thin gin. We
>
> Jazz June. We
> Die soon.

First off, the poem paints a scene of young (golden) black males trying their luck at a game of pool, sometimes for money, sometimes for fun. However, beneath this camaraderie lies the potential for destructiveness, sin, and certainly these young men make it clear that they have the ability to hold their own or "strike straight" if a fight breaks out. And of course the sexual implication of "jazz june" demonstrates that heterosexuality is always near. But harshly, despite

the alluring power of coolness, death lingers and writhes into the notion of coolness, even from the very beginning as the "shovel" lingers and waits for its next victim to "die soon." The aloofness of the "we" at the end of each line forces the reader, and the speaker themselves, to think about their existence and the possible consequences of prescribed masculinity. Brooks provides a disturbing definition of coolness and forces a new revelation of masculinity that must take place among black males. bell hooks uses the title of Brooks' poem as the title of her ground breaking book on masculinity to demonstrate how "when race and class enter [the world of black men], along with patriarchy, [they] endure the worst impositions of masculine patriarchal identity [while being cool: power, money, and sex(uality)] (xii).

Collectively, chapters two through four demonstrate the mechanisms that disrupt black male mobility. The politicization of black men's place and space impairs their ability to enter hegemonic institutions, limiting mobility. Linking textual representations and performance, I have explored the convergence of this process. The criticism examined and my project has exposed an interstitial web of social, psychologically, and literary commentary concerning black masculinity. How others see some black males and how some black males see themselves leads me to conclude with a consideration of the

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power of image and some realities that have occurred because of this image while writing this project.

First, a number of black males were abused or unjustly died at the hands of policemen: Amadou Diallo, who was gunned downed by forty-one bullets; Patrick Dorismond was approached on the street by a stranger seeking drugs; his objections were met by bullets from an undercover New York Police Officer; Rodney King who was beaten like a slave; John Adams, a sixty four year old retiree of Lebanon, Tennessee, who was shot for defending himself when police drug busters smashed in the door of the wrong house; and sixteen-year old Dononvan Jackson of Inglewood, California and fifty-year old Donald Pete were shown being beaten by policemen while they were subdued. It seems there is still a horrid fascination with the black male body and the image he performs.

There are even more disturbing things occurring in the black community: the dramatic increase in the rate of black on black crime by inner city males, and arrests and convictions of successful black male athletes and celebrities, specifically rappers. Recent examples include athlete Rae Carruth who was convicted of hiring a friend to assault his pregnant girlfriend so she could lose the baby; instead, she lost her life. Rapper C-Murder, a.k.a Corey Miller, was indicted on a second degree murder charge for shooting a sixteen year-old by and

arrested for trying to shoot the owner of a local club; Rapper Mystikal, a.k.a Michael Tyler, who was accused of aggravated rape, some of it caught on tape. These are black men who make more money than I every will with ten years of college under my belt. It is evident that poverty is not the only instigator of crime and violence.

Also, in El Reno, Oklahoma a ten-year-old boy was arrested in the death of his ten-year-old friend who he shot once in the head. Tremain Rickey, the victim, is described as a talented athlete who loved football and excelled in school. As an African-American aware of our culture, I picture a boasting scene that ended in death. Add to this a four year old in Houston, Texas who shot his little brother for throwing a toy at him. All of these incidents were national stories and in various ways their themes involve the everyday lives of some black males.

The cause of these crimes and the current condition of the black male is embedded within the complex social and psychological web of masculinity. Most of the black men or victims are killed or abused because of senseless issues by other black men: love gone bad, disagreements and drugs. Like many, the perpetrators were not in life threatening situations in which they had to defend themselves. These incidents speak to the problems black masculinity and the black male image. Aspects of Richard Wright, Claude Brown, and Nathan McCall's novel will be retold in the decades to come if the mechanism that is

fueling corrupt black male performance is not tackled. Through the black masculine paradigm, I have dissected and rebuilt some of the most influencing components of black male performance. How can we save black males from themselves and society, and teach them how to navigate life with a more empowering and endearing image?

The black male quest for masculinity is indeed a very complex journey. There are attempts to achieve this journey through feminism, Afro-centric socialization programs, and other manhood training programs. Though some success has been achieved with these programs and the quest in general, nothing has produced the revolutionary approach needed to bring about a massive change, except for Hip-Hop culture. But the potential that lies in this culture is also becoming one of the main culprits of the disruption of the quest. It drives prescribed masculinity into the minds of young black males and indeed a man's mind is his castle, according to Majors and Billson. bell hooks dissects the reality of hip-hop culture when she posits that it "ushered in a world where black males could declare that they were "keeping it real" when what they were really doing was taking the dead patriarchal protest of the black power movement and rearticulating it in forms that, though entertaining, had for the most part no transformative power, no ability to intervene on politics of domination, and turn the real lives of black men around" (150). If this

turning or reclaiming is to take place, black males must shatter prescribed masculinity and from each dislocated piece of disruptiveness wipe away all corrosive elements by allowing themselves to feel and love freely, without retaliation from one another.

The reclaiming of masculinity must take place during early adolescence, when black males are most impressionable, by teaching them their heritage and what has already been discovered about the complexity of masculinity. African American men need a pedagogy centered on masculinity. The culture in general must demand that Eurocentric hegemonic educational institutions incorporate the black male's experiences, especially in primary education. Most black males hear about Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, and Malcom X but in a very limited context. So much of what black males are experiencing today has already been written about, but the texts sit on shelves, only to be used by academics, while many black males are left feeling that they are encountering the world and its obstacles for first time. This cultural education must also take place within African American culture, because self-knowledge and acceptance starts at home. Mari Evans in *How We Speak* makes this clear:

> …raising (children) is "providing for," while rearing is "responding to." Raising can be satisfied by providing the

essentials: food, shelter, clothing and reasonable care. "Rearing" is a carefully thought out process. Rearing begins with a goal and is supported by a clear view of what are facts and what is truth (and the two are no necessarily synonymous). Rearing is complex and requires sacrifice and dedication. It is an ongoing process of "preparation." Joe Kennedy reared presidents; the British Royal Family rears heirs to the English throne; and when a young African doctor, born in the continent and presently in self-exile in a neighboring country because of her ANC (African National Congress) commitment as interviewed on the news recently and was asked if she was not afraid for her four-year-old son, given her political activism, said, "He has a duty to lay down his life for his people. He is my son, but he is also the son of an oppressed people," she announced the rearing of a "race man." ....Obviously something different, some carefully thought out process, some long-range political view is present when one has a clear sense of one's own reality and therefore intends to rear presidents, rulers, or free men and women.

Evans is speaking to the self-awareness one must have about his/her identity. If black males can establish such an identity, they will be able to view the negative images and behaviors they encounter in their environments and various medias as pure fantasy that can lead to destruction, rather than reality or a code to live by. How cool is it to own your own mind? Completing this project, I now know the answer to this question.

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Vita

Kendric Coleman was born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, and grew up in Mt. Hermon, Louisiana, where he attended Mt. Hermon High School. Coleman received a bachelor of arts degree in English, with a minor in mass communication, from Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge in December of 1997. Coleman continued his matriculation at LSU and completed the Master of Arts degree in English, with a concentration in African American Literature. Upon completion of the master's degree, Coleman accepted a fulltime faculty position at Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College. Later, Coleman pursed his doctorate degree also at LSU where he was the recipient of the Huel Perkins Fellowship. The Doctor of Philosophy will be conferred on Coleman at the May 2005 commencement.