

Pimps Up, Hoes Down?

The Amazing Misadventures of Blackface Masculinity

Davarian Baldwin

That's why the gangsta rhymer ain't inspired
Heinous crimes help record sales more than creative lines
—Nas, "Can't Forget About You"

I don't advocate putting women on the street. But in the
grand scheme of things, throughout history there's always a
pimp and a ho. And I'm certainly not the ho.
—Katt Williams, comedian/actor

So one night I was flipping through channels and came upon what seemed to be a provocative, if not interesting segment on CNN, "Hip-Hop Fueling Wave of Gay Bashing?" which I soon found out was part of Paula Zahn's larger special "Hip-Hop: Art or Poison?" From the start I was suspicious to see precisely how Paula Zahn was gonna handle hip-hop, but then I saw that two people whose ideas I respect, writer Bakari Kitwana and filmmaker Byron Hurt, were featured in at least this particular segment, which became a larger discussion about black masculinity, homophobia, and misogyny through the prism of hip-hop.

I was relieved to see that both Kitwana and Hurt made it clear that homophobia and misogyny are dangerous ways in which a hip-hop-inflected black masculinity has been privileged and both overtly and subtly celebrated. Then Hurt made the mild attempt to possibly suggest that the hypermasculine posturing in hip-hop was in some ways connected to expressions of masculinity within mainstream American culture. He talked a bit about his experiences as a football player for diagnosing the larger problem of a normalized violent and aggressive American masculinity that expresses itself through misogynistic and homophobic acts. Kitwana added that blame for the current construction of this dangerous expression of masculinity within hip-hop needs to be parceled out among consumers who demand this image through their purchasing choices, the artists who continue to provide such images, the music industry that limits the kinds of hip-hop that gets financial backing, and even the FCC, who doesn't enforce the laws that are currently on the books.

At the same time, I was a bit dismayed that two intelligent thinkers like Hurt and Kitwana didn't more directly resist the framing of the show and its limited "What's wrong with hip-hop . . . hip-hop as the source of homophobia" scope. Even with Kitwana's cogent identification of a range of actors at fault, I could see viewers walking away with the idea that the problem still rests with *black* consumers, *black* artists, and a *black* hip-hop music industry. I think we all, especially those of us who do receive some media attention, must be adamant and strategic about shifting conversations away from

an age-old and static discussion of “The Negro [as] Problem,” especially in mainstream discussions and debates. Still it was gratifying to see two black men talking critically about black masculinity in the context of popular culture, especially because I understand how media interests can cut, shape, and flat-out ignore, if not misrepresent, more complex ideas and positions coming from politically marginalized communities.

However, my sense of gratification was quickly ground down under the wheels of the cultural industrial “sound bite” machinery of this television news format and its orchestrated presentation of “panel diversity.” Zahn turned from the two black men to a new panel of “experts” who respond to the thoughts offered by Hurt and Kitwana, of course leaving both Hurt and Kitwana expunged from the frame and with no chance to counter. This Greek chorus included Amy Holmes, a Republican political strategist; Joe Madison, a talk show host at Washington’s WOL Radio; and radio talk show host and NewsMax.com columnist Steve Malzberg. Their collective sound bite anointed “gangsta rap” with the Herculean strength to single-handedly generate a misogynistic and homophobic masculinity, a deviance both rooted in the dysfunctional working-class black family and betraying the artistry of “real hip-hop.”

Now visually and perhaps even politically (a black female conservative who enjoys hip-hop, an “old school” black male social advocate, and a seemingly “with it” white male political centrist), this panel appeared diverse and obviously media savvy, but the range of conversation was decidedly more limited and parochial. After rounds of gangsta rap “isn’t the whole story about the black community, look at the black middle class” and bemoaning the detriments of not “hav[ing] a father in the home,” Malzberg exploded in the typically performative talk-radio way:

Well, I mean, it—this gangsta culture is outrageous. And the excuses I was hearing before, that this is the way that guys are brought up, to express their masculinity, and it’s the only way they know to express their masculinity, it’s a cultural thing, he played football, and—look, I was raised—I’m going to be 48 years old—I was raised in this country. I was raised, I would like to think, in a masculine way. I played sports. I played everything. I never heard of B’s or hoes or treating women like that in my life when I was a kid, not until this gangsta rap culture started appearing out of nowhere.

This outburst and outrage over even the possibility of connecting what is being expressed in hip-hop to a larger American masculinity (“I was raised in this country. . . . I was raised, I would like to think, in a masculine way”) was followed by acquiescence to such a position through the utter silence of the other panelists. I quickly began to understand that this wasn’t a discussion simply about hip-hop or gangsta rap, but that black masculinity was on trial.

Ironically, the framing of this CNN special brought me back to a series of sometimes intense conversations I have had with my oldest of two sons about appropriate gender roles. In these conversations, my kindergartner has grilled me about the appropriate and strict distinction between what girls and boys can and cannot do, especially in terms of play styles, occupations, and even behavior. These inquiries were pretty basic, filled with the typical six-year-old boy response of “Eeuw! That’s for

girls!” when talking about ballet or the inquiry/proclamation that only boys can play football. In fact I was proud that he was reflective enough to even have these conversations with me, instead of simply making up his own mind. He seemed pretty open to my mantra “Girls and boys can be and do anything they desire,” even though this mantra was clearly running up against some received logic fermenting in his brilliant six-year-old brain. Therefore, as a black father, I am concerned by exactly what is shaping and what will shape the definition of masculinity for both of my sons, especially during these crucial and tender developmental years. The CNN special seemed to say, or at least there was little challenge to the suggestion, that the safety of my sons’ healthy masculinity hinges on being protected from hip-hop’s particular brand of misogyny and homophobia over and above exposing them to other venues of socialization, like football or the church.

Of course, one might say my sons are young black children, particularly ripe to be poisoned by hip-hop’s construction of gender roles and the violence, sexism, and homophobia upon which its current hypermasculine posture rests. However, the rub is that my family lives in a predominately white neighborhood (filled with American flags), far away from both any local or familial “hood,” and my sons are rarely allowed to watch hip-hop videos. After further inquiry and observation, I realized that my son’s emergent ideas (or at least questions) about strict gender roles came from the proverbial playground, again not in the “concrete jungle,” but at his almost all-white, extremely affluent, social justice—espousing, folk-singing, LGBT-friendly Quaker school. Now of course this is no indictment of the school, but simply highlights that my son is picking up these potentially dangerous ideas about gender roles *and* he shuttles back and forth between an affluent white school, playgroups, and a solidly middle-class white neighborhood. I was reminded of the obvious fact of America’s pop-culture pantheon of “real guy” gods, from “the Duke” John Wayne and Charlton “from my cold dead hands” Heston on up to Dirty Harry, John Rambo, and Jack Bauer. Such realities reinforce the observations gingerly made by Hurt and soundly denounced by Malzberg, that the current “gangsta” expressions of masculinity may deploy a new lexicon and imagery but are not new and are pervasive throughout American culture writ large.

Most importantly, examining the shape and tenor of the “national” concern with hip-hop masculinity and the less overt but connected playground expression of what “boys and girls do” begs the question: What are the real stakes in this current mainstream discussion about the “Crisis of Black Masculinity”? Conversations with my son made it clear to me that the very same masculine behaviors we are now rightfully demonizing are not unique to hip-hop but also exist and are transmitted within privileged, politically liberal, white spaces. After reflection, I recalled that over and over again the statistic “approximately 80 percent of hip-hop is consumed by white teens” was brought into the CNN conversation. In my most optimistic moments, I hoped such a statistic was meant to help us understand how market forces, particularly the consumer desires of white youth, help shape the kind of hip-hop masculinity we are dealing with where, according to Nas, “Heinous crimes help record sales more than creative lines.” I thought I might have been witnessing an admission that a range of forces, and not some skewed and static vision of Black Masculinity™ (read: deviance), was the problem.

My most realistic side, however, saw that this entire conversation was pulling from a much older “culture of poverty”/underclass ideology to suggest that this deviant

and dangerous hip-hop masculinity is infecting “our children” and American culture more broadly. So here a needed conversation about the future of black masculinity is mired in the most current vogue of what I am calling a “blackface masculinity”—a literal minstrel show where the most canned, marketable, and enticing assumptions about black masculine deviance stand in for a more pointed conversation about the pervasiveness of an American brand of misogyny and homophobia as expressed through hip-hop. By focusing on the allegedly foreign, dare we say “un-American,” vernacular of “B’s or ho’s” and even terms like machismo and “down low,” we can be sold the idea that any upswing in a homophobic and misogynist masculinity is, to use the language of the CNN special, “fueled” by the cultural deficits of black and brown underclass or “ghetto” communities.

When the curtain rises on the current minstrel show of blackface masculinity, America speaks in a tone of righteous indignation and outrage about the future of its innocent impressionable children. Through the foil of “investigation,” the moral majority and the concerned liberal friends of “the blacks” are able to enact a voyeuristic gaze onto the other side of the tracks, invest in twenty-first-century slumming into the concrete jungle, into a corporate-sponsored caricature of “the hood” where pleasure is derived from witnessing or engaging in “deviant” acts while at the same time remaining morally unscathed because such acts are tied to specific bodies as much or more than they are to behaviors.

For example, “our” Timmy watches porn with a hip-hop soundtrack or lets his boys know about a recent “tip drill.” In college he goes to a frat “pimps and hoes” party, engages in a few random hookups, screams the words to “Gin and Juice” with the rest of the crowd, who later shout down a passerby clearly not part of the “in-crowd”: “Go home, you queer, you faggot!” In hearing about these events, we pretend to be shocked, even alarmed, yet are titillated and relieved all at the same time. “Our” kids were “acting ghetto” or, and let’s be honest, “trying to be black. . . . They’ll grow out of it.” I only deploy such racial caricatures to demonstrate how ridiculous yet effective they have become. The point is that while there must be an open and honest discussion about hip-hop’s expressions of masculinity *and* femininity, in these “investigative” conversations and observations, black faces are made to dance in helping shorthand overly simplistic solutions for problems that are grander in scale and extend beyond the Negro Problem.

There is no question in my mind that the current “town hall”-style national concern about brash displays of misogyny and homophobia as a “black thang” is the backdrop on which this current minstrel show is being staged. We have to challenge the idea that conversations about “tip drills” and hip-hop homophobia can be had *separate* from the realities of corporate deals made in strip clubs, high school “hookup” culture, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger dismissing his political opponents as “girlie-men,” representations of women in *Maxim*, *Stuff*, and *FHM* magazines, philandering preachers and pedophilic priests, “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies, a national rise in domestic violence, Comedy Central’s *The Man Show*, the “gay conversion” religious movement, the homophobic/homoerotic violence of Abu Ghraib torture tactics and NYPD plunger/nightstick rectal probes, all-white “pimps and hoes” parties, and even gender inequities in salary for the same occupation and seniority.

To maintain such racialized distinctions between a normative “American” versus a dangerous hip-hop masculinity would require us to ignore a long run of rogue cops and

the code of gangster films as one of the biggest influences on the badman “gangsta” posture in hip-hop. What does it mean that one of America’s most critically acclaimed and popular television shows, *The Sopranos*, is a gangster epic that highlights brash displays of misogyny, homophobia, and physical violence as indelible expressions of a Mafia manhood? What does it mean when “America’s Mayor” and presidential hopeful Rudy Giuliani names *The Godfather* as his favorite movie because it offers a strong model of leadership? The whole conversation comes full circle when we realize that the “hip-hop” community’s current edict of “stop snitching” is a product of being held captive by at least thirty years of the “ride or die” death code of La Cosa Nostra glorified in films (or perhaps the still impenetrable “blue wall of silence” or even the waning anointment of the confessional shield). No matter how “Mafia” the “stop snitching” ethos, there need to be real concerns and conversations about how and why such American gangster ideas transform into the “corporate-made” and consumer-endorsed worldview of “bling, b’s, and “BALLIN’!” (If not just to distinguish gangstas from pimps!)

This brash “ball ’til I fall” version of masculinity invites a deeper discussion about how an “all or nothing” ethos (found in corporate, gangster, and gangsta cultures) is shaping meaning within black communities. Consider comedian/actor Katt Williams, the son of missionaries who took him to live in Haiti, the father of one biological son and six adopted children, and a self-proclaimed pimp. When *Essence* magazine called him out on the seeming contradiction between his charitable heart and his pimp antics, Williams boldly opined, “I don’t advocate putting women on the street. But in the grand scheme of things, throughout history there’s always a pimp and a ho. And I’m certainly not the ho.” Now the first thing that came to my mind is that Williams can’t let go of this pimp aesthetic because it’s his literal bread and butter, performing pimpin’ generates major paper. I also thought, Well at least he’s trying to detach the gender-specific designations of the pimp as the man and the ho as the woman (“there’s always a pimp and a ho”).

At the same time, Williams’s grand narrative (“throughout history”) lifts the veil on our current capitalist culture, because the pimp/ho analogy reduces all relationships down to the exploiter and the exploited. This observation (toward obviously different ends) is eerily reminiscent of Karl Marx’s observation that the ruthless marketplace exploitation of capitalism will ultimately ground society down into two groups—those that own the means of product, including laborers (bourgeoisie), and those that sell their labor power for a wage (proletariat). In no way am I saying that Katt Williams is a Marxist, but I am saying that the gangsta/pimp imagery articulates a desire, even a demand, for masculine dominance in a patriarchal society, a society that cannot guarantee a “manly” wage or social aid. A job, or more importantly a wage (at least for white folks), has historically been one of the most secure markers of working-class manhood and control, so much so that the male wage was also called the “family wage,” in direct contrast to the money earned by a woman working outside the home. Most importantly here, images of bringing home the bacon from the factory or front office, being the “sole” provider for the family, or getting the guap are tantamount to masculine virility and power.

In the new service economy, we find not just the loss of jobs, but also a loss of at least images of manly labor. Here, the gendered undertones of servitude are key when service becomes the key form of labor. This reality simply makes more visible the always

existing conditions of exploitation. But in that visibility there is particularly, in the words of Katt Williams, a heightened masculine resistance to service, as equated with being seen like a “ho.” With the service economy rupture between labor and masculinity, the gangsta and, now more pervasively, the pimp reemerge as attractive icons, for much of the same reason that the gangster film was so popular in the 1930s. “He” is in control of himself and his dangerous surroundings; he outwits authority, lives on the edges of the mainstream world, and most importantly accumulates wealth without seeming to break a sweat. This is one reason you find that the soundtrack for many up-and-comers on “the grind” in brokerage firms and on trading floors is hip-hop. Just check the film *Boiler Room* (“Can’t Knock the Hustle”).

Such conditions help partially explain why there has actually been a decided shift in how masculine dominance is being expressed in hip-hop despite overly generalized constructions of the “gangsta rap” boogey. In the current moment, you actually hear fewer paranoid “gangsta” odes about creeping around corners set to mash on a mark (except for, of course, 50 Cent, who has even tellingly shifted to selling energy drinks, condoms, and “hood” novels). The airwaves are filled with many more “pimp” tales about “getting brain [oral sex] in a parking lot,” or just general self-proclamations of being a boss, a don, or a general baller. Funny enough, “pimp” or “pimpin” has become a general form of greeting between men.

Not by accident, one of the most recurring themes in the new pimp/baller aesthetic is the imagery of getting paid, getting powerful without working, and I would add without work *at all*—because even the crack trade has experienced extreme levels of downsizing and consolidation. Concurrently, the dark and stark stories of hustlers on the grind evaporate, and we hear more about ballers, who seem to have never “put in work,” basking in the light of the floss, the stunt, and the shine. Consider the empty ethereal lyrics for rapper Mims’s latest hit, “This is why I’m hot / This is why I’m hot / I’m hot cause I’m fly / You ain’t cause you not.” His rhymes are symptomatic of a larger trend, a “hotness” based not on seemingly easy work (the hustle), but being fly based on no work at all, where being “fly” seems to produce its own power and security. Yet this power is hardly value neutral. As the gender specificity of being greeted “pimpin” suggests, being fly remains primarily a male stage. Apparently the clothes (and the scantily clad women, cash, cars, and Cristal) do make the man. Yet the history and political economy of black masculinity (slavery) forces us to question the implications of ballers so vigorously equating their sense of masculine power and self-control with being commercially branded. Therefore, the “being fly without work” proclamations in hip-hop help to reveal a much older legacy. If long-standing, dangerous, and yet traditional notions of masculinity expressed through physical dominance over oneself and others can’t be bought, they can and must be taken.

Here hip-hop’s celebration of a hypermasculine posture is at some level a gross overcompensation for the loss of any masculine-defining work, a loss of any relative control, in either the formal or informal U.S. economy. Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates powerfully highlights the image of the gangsta as an exaggerated form of compensation in the absence of *all* manly work, including a decline in the crack trade. As he points out, current day “gangsta rap” is far different than the music’s origins. Alongside over-the-top boyish irreverence over “dope” beats, early gangsta tales came out of an older “badman” storytelling tradition while also offering artistically detailed chronicles and critiques of

the prison system, police violence, economic inequality, and *work* in the minimally profitable and brutal crack trade. However, in the present, even the most grim and gully tales of guap getting are at best desires for control in the absence of even a steady illicit grind and, at worse, nostalgic retrospectives of “hot boys” holding down hot blocks in search of C.R.E.A.M back in the late ’80s and early ’90s, during the rise of the gangsta genre.

Not surprisingly, brash expressions of a hypermasculine posture in an age without manly work are intimately tied to excessive displays of physical—almost homoerotic—dominance over other men, the sexual—nearly pornographic—exploitation of women, and an unadulterated worship at the altar of gross accumulation or at least exhibition of conspicuous wealth. In my mind, the over-the-top tales of money and power without effort (while *renting* the cars, cash to “rain on ’em,” and the chicas) attempt to obscure real anxieties about having any manly power at all. Even on the very important other side of this racial contract, think of the legions of college-age white males holed up in their dorm rooms or parents’ basements literally playing “gangsta” in surround sound via *Grand Theft Auto*–like video games (also called the “gangsta simulator”), in the face of a more and more uncertain economic future with or without a degree.

Briefly consider the unholy convergence between black and white visions of manhood, as revealed in the Duke lacrosse scandal. The act of hiring this black woman to “dance” in replacement of the blond, big-breasted ideal enacts a cross-racial desire and dependency on black women to “reenact a rap video,” to resurrect the black jezebel image, to perform unfettered sexual availability in securing the current state of hypermasculinity. White boys paying for a black women to semi-publicly perform sexual submission by “getting her eagle on” and “bootie clapping” in their living room was unthinkable even ten years ago. Yet now it seems this kind of black female presence is “the latest rage,” one of the “Must-Haves” for the season, a necessary accessory in at least white boy locker-room rites of passage. Such a racial flip side to what could allegedly be seen as a black male propensity for overcompensation continues to highlight the Americanness of this blackface tragicomedy.

The convergence between the very real C.R.E.A.M. dreams of black artists and listeners, the declining futures of a white male consumer base, and the puppeteer work of corporate middle managers—loosely called Artist Development—help explain the persistence and the use-value of what was the gangsta and is now the “P.I.M.P.” In Byron Hurt’s film *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes: A Hip-Hop Head Weighs in on Manhood in Hip-Hop Culture*, a struggling MC confirms, “They don’t give us deals when we speak righteously and things of that nature. . . .” We should conclude that, for now, it pays to play pimps and gangstas. Yet many of the pimp/ho analogies in hip-hop are also in some ways male workplace anxieties. The inability to fully exert a “man’s right” to control his workplace or home lends itself to the grim possibility that most are living like “B’s or hoes” in “the game.” Hence we are left with some of the most cinematically excessive and market-driven images of black masculinity since the tail end of the “blaxploitation” film era.

Yet the actual “street life” of black males in the present moment makes a “lousy cowboy flick,” carrying “weight” or collecting video vixens is obviously more glamorous and “manlier” than collecting minimum wage or serving as a stay-at-home dad. Real adventures in black masculinity would chronicle a life of child support and student loan

payments; the dangers of navigating racial profiling, creditors, dirty diapers, increasingly the INS, DUI charges, poor health, military recruiters and/or frontline bullets in Iraq, and the elusive but penalty-laden status of loitering, vagrancy, and/or disorderly conduct amidst the unfettered powers of Homeland Security. But these tales don't push units or provide security and assurance as effectively and efficiently as the current performative misadventures of gangstas and pimps. Blackface masculinity also serves as a distraction because a discussion of the messy nature of American masculinities that cuts across racial railroad tracks and ghettos could spur larger critiques. In the end, identifying the interracial nature of this black masculine boogeyman may be a start and a spark, but it is not enough as entire black communities lay under siege by this looming image and its incandescent yet ethereal shine. From the start, such a concerted focus on black masculinity can become another way that black women and children get "left behind." But it is still time to look behind the curtain, underneath the mask of blackface masculinity, to plunge into the deep, painful, and prophetic complexities of this blackface masculinity and find what Ralph Ellison called the "blackness of blackness," and perhaps not only find but also save ourselves.

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