Creating Public Fictions: The Black Man as Producer and Consumer

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Introduction

ENGAGING prominent theoretical depictions of black men's struggles to access work, this article discusses how black men's inaccessibility to the American labor market jeopardizes their roles in urban poor communities. Using hip-hop masculinity as a case-in-point, the author applies the gender concept of "marginalized masculinity" to these analyses as a modern-day "public fiction" that, through its usurpation by mainstream media and advertising, offers marginalized black men a way to claim dominance within their worlds and encourages participation in America's economic system, despite its having failed them. In this way black men's relationship to American capitalism has transitioned from producer to consumer.

Revisiting *Tally's Corner*

IN HIS 1967 CLASSIC, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*, Elliot Liebow seeks to explain the dissolution of the black family. In doing so, he is in dialogue with the opinions of his day, prominent among them the 1965 Moynihan Report, which posited that inherent deficiencies existed in the black family, particularly what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan described as a matriarchal structure that emasculated black men. Instead, Liebow found that black men desired, but all too often found themselves painfully incapable of living up to the American dream of a tidy, well-tended house and home supported by a husband and father's income. In contrast to mainstream white society, the labor market for black men tended to be unsteady and paid little. So the black men in Liebow's study turned to what he called "public fictions" that boosted their egos among themselves, as they came together on the street corner. In one passage, Liebow says:

> If, in the course of concealing his failure, or of concealing his fear of even trying, he pretends— through the device of public fictions—that he did not want these things in the first place and claims that he has all along been responding to a different set of rules and prizes, we do not do him or ourselves any good by accepting this claim at face value.[1]

Here, Liebow argues that black men are in fact in dialogue with white society's ideals. However, they constantly find their own resources are inadequate to achieve these ideals and they search for alternatives in their stead. These are not parallel value systems; they are attempts to cover up a deeply-felt sense of shame.

If the lessons from this book still seem relevant, it is no wonder; in the Introduction to the 2003 edition, William Julius Wilson demonstrates how much this book has withstood the "test of time."[2] As a consequence of post-industrialization, the day-to-day reality urban black communities confront is actually worse than in Liebow's time; much of Wilson's own research details how jobs that once attracted black men have since left the central city altogether.[3] More recently, Loïc Wacquant has written about how once the inner-city ghetto was a warehouse for surplus labor,

a place where employers could pick up day laborers on streetcorners, as described in the opening scene of Liebow's first ethnographic chapter "Men and Jobs," but now prisons serve this role, warehousing "surplus" black male bodies.[4] There is a veritable abundance of scholarship coming out of the academy today that asks what is wrong with the black male, such that Alford A. Young, Jr. is justified in beginning his contribution on the subject with the statement that this is a population "well known to be in a state of crisis." His first chapter legitimates this remark with statistics on their dismal, and declining, employment rates.[5]

Yet when taking the lessons from *Tally's Corner*, its gendered aspect (it is the lived experience of black *men* Liebow seeks to comprehend, after all) is often naturalized even as the emasculation of black men is central to his thesis. Discussions of this book are concentrated in the fields of Urban Sociology and African-American Studies while the gender connotations are set aside. Nonetheless, this book serves as a reference for questions of gender and specifically masculine identity in black urban poor communities in different eras. This article will explore how Liebow's and others' theoretical insights put gender in dialogue with contemporary issues around work, black male self-identity and the black urban poor. It will argue that one way black men confront their exclusion from work is through alternatively incorporating themselves into American capitalism with consumer-based identities, specifically, a hip-hop masculinity. In so doing it will advance our understanding of black men's marginalization and how they respond by first, highlighting the changed relationship that this generation of black men has to capitalism, and second, insisting that consumer-based identities be read alongside a masculine identity unable to associate itself with substantial productive labor.

CONSUMER-BASED identities provide a way for men to affirm themselves in society as well as allow them to reconnect to an economic system of which they are no longer a part. Employing Liebow's concept, I describe

these consumer-based hip-hop identities as new "public fictions" that affirm urban poor black men's masculinities. They are new because this is a novel moment when the mass media and corporate branding have turned hip-hop mainstream, bringing black American culture to the forefront of contemporary urban chic. They are public because it is through hip-hop identities that they may connect to the public sphere of the American economy as well as gain visibility as men among men. They are fictions because they are inadequate substitutes for the full productive capacities required to achieve hegemonic American masculinity.

Man as Producer and Black Men's Exclusions

Historically, the goal black men had defined as needed for the restoration of their patriarchal masculinity was equal pay for equal work. Prior to the black power movement most black men wanted jobs—equal pay for equal work—which was the vision of basic civil rights. They wanted the economic power to provide for themselves and family.[6]

IN THE ABOVE QUOTE, bell hooks describes how black men, up through the civil rights generation, believed that they could restore their inadequate masculinities through achieving parity to white men with "equal pay for equal work." In doing so, they could become providers, a role that is core to masculine identity in a capitalist system. Societal expectations of gender roles emerged alongside the birth of capitalism, with men becoming wage laborers in the public sphere, and women non-wage laborers—mothers, wives—in the domestic sphere. But this was an entitlement that accompanied white privilege. In her article "A Telling Difference," Patricia Hill Collins says that "hegemonic white masculinity demonstrates how white male dominance in the public sphere of the political economy articulates white male dominance in the private sphere of family."[7] Domination of the economy thus supports domination of the family, solidifying the man as the family's natural head. Collins further explains that "real men" are not poor: as white men control the economy, this defini-

tion also serves as racial exclusion, so that real men are not black, either. Their masculinities are thereby threatened publicly and privately.

Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson discuss how being a black man often means economic, political and social impotence vis-à-vis white-dominated society because "African-American men have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men: breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector. Unlike white men, however, blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success."[8] Their section on "Masculine Attainment" provides a fruitful overview of twentieth-century accounts of this troubling disparity between desiring and attaining American notions of masculinity beginning with E. F. Frazier's 1940 analysis.[9] There is clearly historical depth to this pressing issue that Gender Studies, with the new arrival of Masculinity Studies, appears to have discovered only in the past quarter century. Alford A. Young situates these theories, which he describes as arguing that subordinate groups "stretch their values" to fit mainstream societal ideals, within a broad genre around lower-class subcultures that had their heyday in the 1960s.[10] In short, scholarship has long contended that black men in America are unable to live up to mainstream standards of masculinity, and so they are men found lacking. One way to comprehend their behavior is to suggest they become men through ways that are relevant to themselves and their peers, and that establish status in their communities. This idea has often centered in on black men's relationship to violence, although the focus on "bling" and hip-hop, into which I insert my analysis, is becoming increasingly common.

I ARGUE that what is novel about this generation of marginal black men is the heightened degree of dislocation they experience as a consequence of post-industrialization as well as the black male's popularization in mainstream media; however, the general sense of failing to achieve a masculinized American dream is in historical continuity with black men's experiences. Previously, black men struggled to be recognized as equal and for their labor to be valued accordingly. The history of slavery, segregation and racism more generally have made this a central point of contention as black men tried to gain the entitlements, publicly and privately, that their labor deserved. The relationship that marginal black men now have to the American economy no longer figures as exploitation where they struggle for "equal pay for equal work." Structural changes, namely deindustrialization, outsourcing, immigration and suburbanization have meant that now many urban poor black men are jobless altogether. This marks a transition from exploitation to exclusion, and media-inspired hip-hop identities provide powerful, redemptive narratives of belonging.

The mass media provides mainstream and marginal Americans alike models of men being men, irrespective of their productive capacities. The commodification of inner-city black popular culture, or hip-hop, by mainstream advertising and media provides a lens into the process by which a masculinity may arise that nonetheless links a marginal group to the majority culture's ideals. While the artists themselves remain black, the messages that are capable of reaching a broad audience are those that ensure profits, profits that disproportionately benefit the corporate agents behind the scenes. Thus a commodified hip-hop identity is one that promises a total incorporation into the US economy through mass media-generated consumerism. Ways to exemplify masculinity appear for marginalized men who are unable to achieve the dominant form, at times not unlike the public fictions Liebow discusses regarding streetcorner men. bell hooks notes that, due to the historic impossibility of black men achieving a wage that would allow them to live up to mainstream America's expectations of manhood, the end result—money—trumped the necessity for work itself: "black men who could show they had money (no matter how they acquired it) could be among the powerful."[11] By extension, beyond money itself, showing off money became a way for men to demonstrate status. Thus display is a preeminent

force in constructing masculinity, and versions that exhibit appropriate displays assume enormous significance, especially for marginal men who cannot be ideal-typical hegemonic men. A major player in constructing acceptable alternative displays is the media, and R.W. Connell, the leading theorist on masculinity, emphasizes the role of the United States in dominating the "global circulation of gender images" in mass communications.[12] Media images connect cities with suburbs and the local with the global. In doing so, images take on incredible power in meaning-making and link up disparate individuals who see commonality in those meanings.

The Black Man as Consumer

The black community...is not merely a vast, underdeveloped labor market it is a multi-billion dollar consumer market.[13]

A MAINSTREAM hip-hop identity[14] glorifying materialism provides an excellent example of a contemporary marginalized masculinity, one of four ideal-typical masculinities that Connell defines, this one in relation to marginal men unable to achieve the dominant, or hegemonic, form.[15] Like the argument I put forth in this essay, Majors and Billson connect black American men's lack of access to work that allows them to participate as *men* in American society to a desire to affirm themselves and establish their masculinity via a "symbolic universe."[16] I, however, add that in doing so, black men are *connecting* to a system of which they are no longer a part. In other words, focusing on a consumption-oriented identity may enable marginal black American men to belong to a system that has excluded them as producers. This is in contrast to Majors and Billson's argument, who, using Merton's functionalist theory of how individuals adapt to their inability to achieve socially-sanctioned goals, juxtapose the "cool pose" that black men adopt as *innovative* and *rebellious*, to otherwise *conformist* responses. They say that "Success in achieving goals by conforming to legitimate, conventional means is possible only in the absence of institutionalized barri-

ers, such as racism..."[17] But if we look instead at who a consumption-based identity, in pure market terms, ultimately serves—corporate interests controlled by and profiting mostly privileged white men—it is clear that *buying into* the dominant American political economy is neither as rebellious nor as innovative as it may at first seem. For this reason, it is necessary to reevaluate what end a preoccupation with a consumption-based hip-hop identity serves: it allows another angle to belong for men otherwise excluded. The exclusions black American males experience in today's post-industrial economy differ fundamentally from the exploitation of their father's and grandfather's generations, and therefore their response does also. As a consequence of exclusion, black men are consciously re-incorporating themselves into this system, and in doing so, conforming to contemporary capitalism's relationship with an American consumerist ethos.

B AKARI KITWANA'S BOOK *The Hip-Hop Generation* discusses aspects of mainstream hip-hop identity that respond directly to feelings of inadequacy and dislocation that inner city black men face in the neoliberal political economy. For example, in discussing contemporary conflicts black fathers face, Kitwana highlights the difficult subject of child support laws that, in a precarious economy, men at times must literally, and with the weight of the community's moral authority against them, choose between their own basic needs and those of their children.[18] Real and persistent dilemmas such as these complicate making sense out of the black man who predominantly identifies as a consumer. In addition, it makes the hip-hop industry, buttressed by mainstream media and corporate life, a guilty player in already-struggling urban poor black communities: "As everyday people worldwide struggle to survive...corporations work diligently to sell them a slice of modern life..."[19] This entails marketing through and to the very men the economic system serves so poorly as they are encouraged to use their limited resources to buy into "modern life." However, when choosing what to do with his limited resources, it is worth remembering that the

role of provider can be made no more realistic to a segment of the American population that has little access to regular work with decent pay. While his minimum wage earnings and unsteady job record frequently do not meet the requirements for, say, sustained child support, they can afford sporadic spending on something that both his peers and constant advertising promises to make him more of a man. And if taking "full responsibility" as a father and husband could only serve to highlight his shortcomings in these domains, as an absent father his would-be family may be more likely to greet his occasional support with gratitude since such actions are benevolently "unnecessary." Thus the public fiction of which Liebow spoke—that the black man does not want these things—corresponds to the public fiction that he wants other things: to consume. But the costs are enormous. A glorified masculinity that occurs independently of women and children builds a serious schism in the black community. Attention to such a consumption-based identity is attention away from repairing these damaged connections. And it is a message one may cultivate oneself with material means that entail a focus on none other than the self.

FURTHER, it is cooperation with an economic system that has consistently proven disastrous for black American men at a moment when their unproductive bodies render them even less powerful than was their fathers' generation, bent on resistance. Cut off from capitalism as producers, popular hip-hop culture's celebration of consumption—once the woman's terrain within traditional capitalist gender divisions—provide a new way for black men to be incorporated. Kitwana describes how the marketing of multinational corporations has made visual images "central to the identity of an entire generation" but this, as he finds Cornel West insisting in *Race Matters*, is coded as masculine.[20] Suddenly men finding themselves redundant or "surplus" in a global capitalist system align with the brand names that exemplify that system. Music videos cry out "bling" with fancy cars, gold jewelry and bodies adorned head-to-toe in designer threads.

These public fictions generate complicity to a nonetheless oppressive system. They suggest to those within black communities as well as to mainstream white America that a separate value orientation exists for black men, whose most revolutionary demands are articulated by lyrics such as the ones Birdman, rapper and founder of Cash Money Records, sings in "Money to Blow" from his 2009 album *Pricele$$*:

> Lamborghini and the Bentleys on the V-set.
> Louie lens iced out with the black diamonds.
> Car of the year Ferrari the new Spider.
> No lie I'm higher than I ever been.
> Born rich born uptown born to win.

The exaggerated emphasis on luxury brands suggests that achievement is image-based; not only achieving, but "winning" is about having money to "blow," to be wasted, on high-end labels.

JEFF CHANG'S *Can't Stop Won't Stop* narrates in detail how style and individuality have been central to the birth of this black American subculture. One of the defining turns away from the civil rights generation to the hip-hop generation's respective movements was a shift from politics to culture, and within this new paradigm, the battle over representation in an era of corporate and media monopolies. As hip-hop grew in popularity beyond the local, marketers quickly attached themselves to the movement, with representation of the hip-hop generation becoming a powerful and lucrative, commodified urban chic.[21] In a section entitled "Hip-Hop as Urban Lifestyle," Chang revisits how, "as companies like Nike, Adidas, and Pepsi searched for new markets, they discovered that urban youth of color—until then an ignored niche—were a more brand-conscious, indeed brand-leading, demographic than they had ever realized."[22] Kitwana makes a near-identical point when he says that "One can find the faces, bodies, attitudes, and language of black youth attached to slick advertisements that sell what have become global products, whether it's Coca-Cola and Pepsi [or] Reebok and Nike sneakers."[23] In contemporary music videos, the color-coded inner city gang loyalties are transformed into designer loyalties displayed

in excess and sung about, rhymed about, and otherwise glorified. The informative website www.howstuffworks.com devotes a page to hip-hop fashion, naming the various trends and brands it made notorious.[24]

The emergence of a mainstream hip-hop identity echoes the distinct form of despair that poor black men face under contemporary capitalism. Whereas the civil rights generation enjoyed the relative luxury of demanding equal rights, the dislocation of inner city black communities transforms their demands. Kitwana quotes Sidney Willhelm's "prophetic" 1970 essay *Who Needs the Negro* in stating the transition black labor has undergone from exploited to "obsolete."[25] The previous black generation identified their contribution to the American industrial economy as one of deep exploitation and united to transform their working conditions and entitlements. Today, instead of resisting an oppressive system, underprivileged black men seek to belong to it, if not as producers, at least as consumers. This is because structural changes in the American economy have meant that instead of being devalued, black male labor is now bypassed. Chang says that hip-hop culture "offered a way this elusive generation could be assimilated, categorized, made profitable." Nonetheless he reminds his readers that this "cultural desegregation" was at best a poor substitute for undoing the underlying realities of American color-conscious socioeconomic entitlements.[26]

THE PROSPECT of regular and sufficient work falls off the radar as poor inner-city blacks, especially men, find themselves largely dislocated from today's US economy. Yet at the same time we find black men featured in large advertising campaigns for brand name goods. On the ground, breaking stories on the local news tell of black men killing black men for these same goods: a coveted model of sneakers or an original designer hoodie. Furthermore, the brazen individuality of making it big as a music artist while leaving community demands in the dust echoes present-day capitalist glorifications of the lone entrepreneur. Indeed, Chang describes how the "biggest artists were brands themselves, generating lifestyles based on their own inef-

fable beings...At the turn of the century the hip-hop generation was now at the center of a global capitalist process generating billions in revenues."[27] And this at a time of deep dislocation from the black American, inner city communities from which so many of these artists hailed. What is remarkable, then, is how fully incorporating a consumer-based hip-hop identity is to marginal black men who otherwise find themselves largely excluded from American capitalism.

WHILE BLACK American poverty is certainly a concern for both men and women, the particular place capitalism sets aside for men as the wage laborers and providers makes the reality of uncertainty and instability especially difficult for men attempting to define their roles, and worth, in their communities. It is thus more urgent for men to reach for new signifiers—new public fictions—to celebrate their masculinity. That black masculinity is a centerpiece of hip-hop materialism, itself firmly rooted within mainstream global capitalism, is ironic at first take. How can headlining black masculinity celebrate and propagate a system that does little to serve black men? Situating this question within the context of contemporary capitalist ideals and the promise that consumerism holds of belonging for a demographic that has been consistently denied equal participation provides one explanation.

Conclusion: Hip-hop as Marginalized Masculinity

[T]he worldview of hip-hop generationers has been influenced by persisting segregation in an America that preaches democracy and inclusion. This contradiction has been particularly hard for us to swallow.[28]

As a response to a history of oppression and social isolation in this country, coolness may be a survival strategy that has cost the black male—and society—an enormous price.[29]

MAINSTREAM hip-hop as a marginalized masculinity encapsulates a powerful script to reintegrate men into a world that has left them behind while providing the same pub-

lic fictions Liebow observed to restore their identities as men even when they fail as heads of household. Through the lens of marginalized masculinity, we may seek to understand how joblessness affects black male self-identity and the black urban poor community. In Liebow's time, as now, men employ public fictions: strategies to restore their sense of self in the micro- and macro-worlds they inhabit. How they articulate their identities is a product of changes from one generation to the next. Today, the simultaneous extreme dislocations and global connectedness of capitalism denies black men work while promising inclusion in a consumerist society by a distinctly black but generically materialist identity. They may not live up to the capitalist ideal of being provider, but they can nonetheless mimic other ideals—marginalized masculinities—that have emerged as a consequence of the media and advertising industries. In focusing on the specifically gendered dimension of this identity and of the larger crisis afflicting the black American inner city, we may appreciate both the continuity that a hip-hop identity holds for black men across generations who seek out alternate ways to be men as well as the novelty it holds for men who seek to belong to contemporary global society as consumers once they have been denied inclusion as producers.

Endnotes

1. Elliot Liebow. *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, 144.
2. William Julius Wilson. Introduction to the 2003 edition of *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* by Elliot Liebow. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, xxxiii.
3. See, for example, William Julius Wilson. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor.* New York: Vintage, 1996.
4. Loïc Wacquant. "Racial Stigma in the Making of the Punitive State," in Glenn Loury et al. (eds.), *Race, Incarceration and American Values. The Tanner Lectures.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.
5. Alford A. Young, Jr. *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity and Future Life Chances.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, xiiv and 16-17.
6. bell hooks. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity.* New York: Routledge, 2004, 15.
7. Patricia Hill Collins. "A Telling Difference: Dominance, Strength, and Black Masculinities," in Athena D. Mutua (ed.), *Progressive Black Masculinities.* New York: Routledge, 2006, 83.
8. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America.* New York: Touchstone, 1992, 1.
9. Ibid, 30-33. The theorists Majors and Billson mention are, in order from date of publication, Frazier (1940), Keil (1966), Rainwater (1966), Billingsley (1968), Cazaneve (1981), and Robinson, Bailey and Smith (1985).
10. Alford A. Young, Jr. *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity and Future Life Chances,* 23.
11. bell hooks. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* 19.
12. R. W. Connell. *The Men and the Boys.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 65.
13. Lou Turner. "Toward a Radical Critique of Black Economy." *The Black Scholar,* Vol. 40, No.1 (2010), 25.
14. I qualify this discussion with the use of "mainstream" or "popular" hip hop identity because there are plenty of forms of hip hop that do not fall under the discussion here. I am referring directly to the highly consumerist, "pimp" and "bling" category of hip hop described here: "As commercial hip-hop has evolved over the past three decades, it has become an increasingly accurate mirror for American values. In the past decade, many of the most successful hip-hoppers have been enthralled with the persona of the pimp—the perfect metaphor for American capitalism." From Natalie Hopkinson and Natalie Y. Moore. *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation.* San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2006.
15. R.W. Connell. *Masculinities.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
16. Majors, Richard and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America,* 2.
17. Ibid, 6.
18. Bakari Kitwana. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture.* New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2002.
19. Ibid, 11.
20. Bakari Kitwana. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture,* 10.
21. Jeff Chang. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation.*
22. Ibid, 417.
23. Bakari Kitwana. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture,* 9.
24. A summary of the most prominent brand names lists alphabetically Baby Phat, Carhartt, Converse, Dickies, Ecko and Ecko Red, Fubu, G-unit, Lacoste, Phat Farm, Reebok, Rocawear, Sean John, and Von Dutch. How Stuff Works. "How Hip-Hop Works." A Discovery Company. www.howstuffworks.com
25. Bakari Kitwana. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture,* 35-36.
26. Jeff Chang. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation,* 420-421.27. Ibid, 447.
28. Bakari Kitwana. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture,* 13.
29. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America,* xi.